

Chapter 1

Letters

Harry Potter never enjoyed the ride on the Hogwarts express when it traveled away from the school. He knew, that with each passing second, he sped closer to the smallest bedroom of Privet drive, to chores, and to neglect at the hands of his relatives. In short, to the Dursleys. Harry was far past sick of his relatives. He didn't understand why he couldn't just simply go to the Burrow, or with Professor Lupin? Or even just get a room at the Leaky Cauldron like he had before the year began. He sighed a little bit and stared out the window. He resigned himself to thinking of ways that he could make his summer more bearable. Surely, after Aunt Marge, the Dursley's wouldn't be happy to see him. But, perhaps they'd simply just ignore him more. He could remember how happy he felt in those brief moments when he thought he could go and live with his Godfather. He had dreams of a happy family, a caring adult, and those dreams had seemed so close. But now there was just the crushing sadness that accompanied shattered hopes and dreams.

He was reminded of the letter he had received a few moments before from Sirius. The little owl was still fluttering around the compartment. He could hear his two best friends, Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley, chatting casually about what to name the excitable owl. He had suggested 'Warren' after a singer his aunt liked. One of his songs reminded him of the bird. They hadn't known the tiny thing long, but it certainly didn't seem like it would run out of energy anytime in the foreseeable future.

As he thought about the bird, and who it came from, Harry realized he still wasn't very sure about his Godfather. It was strange to realize that he was not completely cut off from his parents. He wondered why he never thought about who had been his parents' friends. He assumed Dumbledore, of course, but the more he thought of it, were they friends or did they have a similar relation to the old teacher that Harry did now? Sure, Dumbledore had possessed his father's cloak for a while, but could there have been something more? He felt woefully naive for assuming that every link to his parents had been severed with their death. He made a mental note to talk to Sirius or Lupin about his parents the next chance he got. He had learned a lot about them during this last year, but he wanted to learn more. At the very least it would be nice to hear

stories, and to learn more about them. Hopefully they wouldn't feel the need to tell him that he looked just like his father, but the eyes, Lily's eyes.

He looked down at the letter he was still clutching in his hands. He read it again, for perhaps the fifth time since he received it. He still couldn't help but smirk at the permission slip to attend Hogsmeade visits. At least he wouldn't have to wear the cloak in the village anymore. That was a definite plus. He also knew that he would never live down the fact that Sirius had sent him the broom. Of course, Hermione was not really the type to gloat about that. Harry made a mental note to put a little more faith in her judgment. She was only looking out for his best interest. Really, the more he thought about it, he couldn't believe he was ready to jump onto a broomstick from an unknown sender without a second thought? Had his first year taught him nothing at all? And Ron was upset that the broom was scanned by the professors? He was slightly concerned that his best friend seemed to have little care for his personal welfare. Yet he couldn't blame Ron. He was just as excited to hop up onto the broom as his friend was to watch him on it. Why he hadn't thought, like Hermione, that someone may have been out to get him amazed him. While Voldemort may have been gone, or at least a wraith, he knew he should be more careful than that. It was as much his fault as his friends. He and Ron would both need to grow, he knew, to understand the dangers that likely faced him. He realized, that after Trelawney, he was afraid. Why he hadn't been frightened before that, he didn't know.

After a few moments some of their other friends, notably Neville Longbottom and Ginny Weasley, joined them in the compartment. The argument about the name of the owl became more spirited. Harry didn't pay as close of attention as he likely could have. And when he did participate, he decided to play the role of the critic rather than suggest any new names. It was easier, after all. The argument continued without any major breakthroughs. Something told Harry he wouldn't learn the name of the owl until the summer. Harry's thoughts continued to drift to Sirius. He wondered what his Godfather would do now? Surely, he had to have some type of house he could hideout at or something. He had invited Harry to live with him, which meant he had to have some type of lodging.

"So, who do you have in the World Cup?" Harry heard Ron ask. The question snapped him out of his thought. He hadn't followed the

preliminary matches at all. Some of the students had chatted about scores, or perused the Prophet for box scores. Occasionally a game could be heard on the wireless in the common room, but Harry rarely paid attention to it. Sure, he loved playing quidditch, but he rarely paid attention to it during school. He wondered if he would if he lived in the Wizarding world. As is now he didn't watch many sports. Occasionally, he'd catch an early morning Formula One race while the rest of the Dursley's were asleep. But he didn't particularly care. It was just on TV at the time. He rarely kept it on for more than a few minutes. Usually, during the day when most sports were on he tried to avoid being in the house, or around the Dursleys.

"I have no idea," Harry replied. "How's England?"

"Not very good. I doubt they'll make it far. The Irish are pretty damn good, though. They should make it far," Ron replied.

"Oh," Harry replied.

"Who else is good?" Neville asked.

"The Germans aren't bad. The French shouldn't do anything. Italy may surprise," Ginny responded. Neville and Harry both looked at her almost in shock. She smiled a little, for just a moment, before blushing and looking away from Harry. "What, I like Quidditch too. You grow up with a bunch of brothers and not develop some interest in the sport!" Everyone in the compartment laughed. They continued to talk of Quidditch, making predictions and insulting each other's picks.

The ride continued. Harry noticed that the prefects were coming from compartment to compartment, pausing for a few moments at each and hanging out what appeared to be manila folders. Strange, he thought. It must just be the 'don't use magic outside of school' reminder. He saw two of the Ravenclaw prefects approach their compartment. The female one opened the door and entered.

"Who do we have in there?" the male asked, looking over her shoulder.

"Looks like Potter, Granger, The youngest two Weasley's, and Longbottom," the female prefect responded. Harry didn't know her, but she was a pretty girl with long brown hair and hazel eyes. It

didn't hurt, either, that she had changed out of her school uniform already and wore a tight pair of jeans and a violet t-shirt. Really, the only reason Harry knew her house or her status was because she had pinned the badge to her t-shirt, and had one of her school ties wrapped around her wrist. He thought she had likely just finished her fifth year. The male prefect, who remained behind her in the hallway dug through a bag of something, pulling out a bunch of the envelopes. He handed them to the girl who started handing them out. Harry looked at his, it seemed like your typical manila envelope. There was a Hogwarts crest in the center of it, and in the upper corner was 'H. Potter' with 'Gryffindor' and 'Yr 4' written under it. He then opened it and looked inside. There wasn't a warning about using magic outside of school. In fact, there wasn't anything inside it at all.

"What are these for?" Hermione asked the prefect girl. She was checking off their names on a sheet. Harry looked over at Hermione's folder. It was labeled the same way as his.

"These are your summer assignments," the prefect said as she looked down her sheet, making sure everything was in order.

"But there's nothing in them!" Hermione exclaimed. The prefect raised her eyes and looked at Hermione, then shook her head and marked some things off on the paper in front of her.

"I'm getting to that," she said curtly. Hermione's face fell for a moment.

"Oh," she replied.

"Well, alright. That's in order," she said as she tucked the quill back into her hair. She took out her wand and cast a quick activation spell on all of the envelopes in the compartment, then wrapped the parchment she had been checking things off of around her wand and slid it back into her pocket. She turned to exit the compartment then.

"So what do we do with these then?" Ron asked, holding his up in the air limply. The prefect looked back at them.

"Oh, uhm. Right," she began. She paused for a moment and continued with what Harry assumed was a pre-planned speech. "In

the spirit of international cooperation you are required to write three letters to a pen-pal over the summer months," she explained.

"But what do these have to do with anything?" Ron asked, still holding his folder up. The prefect glared at him a little bit.

"I'm getting to that," she responded. "You will write a letter and place it in your folder. The charm place on the folder will send it to your pen pal. Copies will be sent to your head of house as well, to make sure you do in fact complete the assignment."

"Don't we get to know our pen pal?" Hermione asked. She sounded excited by the assignment. Ron and Neville groaned a little bit at the thought. Ginny seemed mostly indifferent. Harry wasn't sure how he felt about it. It felt mostly like another assignment he'd have to do. But, at the very least, it would give him something to do when he sat alone in his room at night.

"No," the prefect responded. "The school feels that having the first letter be anonymous will be better for the assignment."

"But what if we have nothing in common with them!" Ron asked.

"That shouldn't be a problem. You were matched with a pen pal based on age and interests. There are plenty of students at both Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. I'm sure they matched you appropriately," she responded.

"So Hogwarts students are writing to the students of two other schools?" Hermione asked. Harry was glad she did. He wasn't sure what a Beauxbatons or Durmstrang were. But gathered that they were other schools. It did seem off that Hogwarts's students could match with both of the schools, unless the others were much smaller.

"Not quite. The pen pals are distributed throughout all three schools. The only guarantee is that you do not have one from your own school. Don't ask me for more information than that. I don't know anything more," the prefect seemed annoyed. Harry guessed that just about everyone else had simply accepted the assignment without much thought.

"Are we expected to write first?" Hermione asked. The prefect stared at her again, like she couldn't believe this girl would just keep asking questions.

"There are no expectations except that you write the pen-pal three letters. Every school, to my knowledge, is getting the envelope upon their departure," she explained, sounding somewhat exasperated.

"Oh, okay. Thanks," Hermione responded.

"Any more questions?" the prefect asked.

"What happens if we don't do it?" Ron asked. Harry had to admit. He felt that that was a far better question than any of the ones Hermione had asked. The prefect smiled little bit.

"One month of detentions with your head of house, and for those who are old enough, a one year ban from Hogsmeade visits," the prefect responded automatically. Harry got the feeling she was use to answering that question.

"Ouch," Ron responded. The prefect smiled briefly at him.

"Indeed, so I highly suggest that you do write the letters. We are also required to inform you that your head of house expects excellence, or at least competence in them. The professors will not have the institution shamed by terrible handwriting or poor composition. But they also would like us to remind you that perfection is not required on these assignments," the prefect concluded. "Now, are there any final questions?"

"No. Thank you," Hermione said. The prefect nodded and turned, stepping out of the compartment.

"Who's next, Mark?" Harry heard her ask as she slid the door closed. He noticed Ron staring after her.

"Who is she?" Ron asked, still staring at the compartment door.

"Lillian Seshion," Hermione said. "She's a Ravenclaw prefect. I'm surprised you don't know her, Harry should."

"What me, how?" Harry asked.

"Yea, him how?" Ron said.

"Honestly you two, don't you pay attention at all?" Hermione asked.

"Apparently not," Ron responded, eliciting laughs all around.

"She's a chaser for Ravenclaw," Ginny responded.

"She is?" Ron said, sounding incredibly surprised. Like he should have noticed that earlier. There was only one member of the Ravenclaw Quidditch team Harry was really interested in, though, so he had never noticed her.

"Yes, she is," Hermione scoffed.

"She's rather good, too," Ginny added.

"But Davies and Chambers do all of their scoring!" Ron exclaimed. Ginny shook her head.

"Yea. She has a rather weak arm. And not the greatest of shots. But she plays some of the best defense from a chaser that I've ever seen," Ginny explained. "In fact, I've heard a few developmental league teams are going to be scouting her next year."

"Really?" Ron asked.

"Yes," Ginny said. "She's nice, too. She's let me practice against her."

"She's helped me with potions, too," Neville said quietly.

"When did she do that?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, she was just in the library one night, writing a letter, and saw what I was working on and offered some help. We don't ever have potions with the Ravenclaws, but the 'Puffs all say she's incredible there. Like better than Hermione good. Apparently even Snape is civil with in class," Neville said. Hermione scoffed at the reference of her skill.

"I've heard that. But, I've also heard she can't transfigure anything. McGonagall has to give her extra lessons every year," Hermione commented. The compartment was silent for a moment until Ron spoke again.

"Why don't Gryffindor girls look like that?" He asked quietly.

"Excuse me?" Hermione scoffed. Ron looked at her.

"What? Did you see her, total knockout, right guys?" Ron continued. Harry noticed Hermione was fuming. Neville blushed a little bit before he spoke.

"Yes, she's beautiful," he admitted. Both girls stared at Harry then, as if waiting for his judgment.

"I, uh....erm. She's not bad, but not my type," Harry said, hoping that was a diplomatic enough answer. It was the truth, too, he realized. Cho Chang was certainly more his current type.

"Thank you, Harry," Hermione said. He couldn't tell if she was being sarcastic or not. He figured it would be best not to ask. Ginny just blushed and looked away.

"So, Hermione," Harry spoke carefully. "What do you know of these other magic schools. I didn't even know they existed." He figured stroking her ego would be a good way to have her warm up, if she was really annoyed.

"Oh, not much really. Beauxbatons is in southern France. I think it's near Cannes, but I can't be sure. Like Hogwarts it's unplottable. They even have charms that prevent people from rival schools seeing it," Hermione said softly.

"Ugh, the French? They're the only country with a Quidditch team worse than England!" Ron scoffed. "I hope I get a Durmstrang student. Not going to have anything to talk about with a French one."

"And you'll have so much more to talk about with a Durmstrang one, Ronald," Hermione scoffed. Harry could sense her need to lecture coming on and decided to spur her on.

"And why is that?" Harry asked. Hermione smiled at him.

"Because Durmstrang only accepts pure-blood loyalists. They're even more secretive than Beauxbatons. Their uniforms require a lot of cold-weather clothing. And they're somewhere in central Europe. The exact location wasn't in any book I could find," she explained.

"How do you know all of this?" Ron asked, looking surprised. Harry felt that he at least had an excuse for his ignorance. He assumed other magical people would know more, but judging from the looks on Neville, Ginny and Ron's faces. They were nearly as clueless as he was.

"I picked up a book on it last year," Hermione said carefully.

"Why?" Neville asked.

"I wanted to see if Hogwarts was really the premier magical academy," Hermione answered.

"And what did you find?" Ginny asked.

"Not much," Hermione admitted. "It's near impossible to find curriculum from any of the schools. There's rumors that Durmstrang focuses more on the Dark Arts than Hogwarts or Beauxbatons, but that is about it. It seems that there is actually very little choice in schooling. They're all rather insular."

"I wonder why that is?" Harry asked. From what he knew of Muggle schools, they were more likely to try to actively recruit some students. Yet magical schools seemed to want privacy more than anything else.

"I don't know," Hermione shrugged. "Some schools were already trying to recruit me when I got my Hogwarts letter. I almost expected the magical world to be the same way. Apparently I was wrong."

"That's just how it is here," Ron said. Harry and Hermione looked over at him.

"Yea," Neville agreed. "That's just how it's done." Hermione could tell that the conversation wasn't going to get them anywhere, so she decided to not press. To not point out how bad of an answer that was.

The train rolled on. Eventually, it arrived at King's Cross station. Harry dreaded his return to his relatives. But he had thought of a clever way to ensure that they would bother him less. He clutched the letter from Sirius in his hand and stepped off of the train, ready to brave the Dursleys. He barely heard Ron comment on possibly attending the World Cup.

A few hours later found him in the smallest bedroom at Privet Drive. The Dursley's had left to take Dudley out to a celebratory dinner for the end of his semester. They made no mistake to mention, repeatedly, just how much of a nuisance having to pick him up, and then drive someplace for dinner was. Uncle Vernon also made it quite clear he was not allowed out of his room while they were gone. So, naturally, the first thing he did was look for something edible in the fridge. Then he sat down in front of the TV and watched that for a few hours. It wasn't until he heard Uncle Vernon's car pull into the drive that he decided to run up the stairs and disappear into his room. He grabbed a book, turned Dudley's old TV, with very low volume, and acted like he was reading. He wasn't the least bit surprised when no one came to check on him. After a few moments, he opened his trunk to look for some pajamas to change into. He noticed the envelope on top of it. He plucked it up and tossed it on to the bed, figuring that of all his summer assignments, it would require the least amount of effort. Or, at the very least, the least amount of reading to complete. He grabbed one of his history books and a roll of parchment and tossed them onto his bed as well. After changing he grabbed a quill and some ink and sat on his bed. He dipped the quill and started to think about what to write. He didn't move for a few moments, framing the start of the letter in his head, before he decided to start to write, using the history textbook as a makeshift table.

Dear Fellow Student,

That's a terrible way to start a letter, but I figured it would be better than 'to who receives this' or 'dear pen-pal'. So I went with this instead. My name is Harry. I just finished my third year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I'm a member of the Gryffindor house, if that means anything to you. I'm not exactly sure how to have a pen-pal. I've never really done anything like this before. So if I ramble I apologize. I'm not sure what the Professors are expecting

for this assignment. The prefect who explained the assignment didn't do a very good job.

Since I know nothing about you, I guess I'll have to talk about me. I dislike talking about myself; people always assume I'm lying or glory seeking. I know I'm not lying, and I certainly don't think I'm glory seeking.

So, well, I suppose starting with my interests is as good of a spot as any. I enjoy quidditch. My friend thinks he can get tickets to the world cup through his father, who works at the Ministry of Magic. That should be fun. I don't really follow international quidditch, or the Quidditch leagues, but I do enjoy playing the game. I'm the seeker on my house team. We won the school tournament this year. First time in a long time our house team has done that. I'm the seeker. I enjoy chasing too, but I only ever do it when one of our chasers misses practice.

In school my favorite classes are Defense Against the Dark Arts and Transfiguration. I also started taking our Magical Creatures class, as well as Divination. I'm not sure I really enjoy either of them, but I like the professor for creatures. Divination, well, the professor just keeps trying to predict my death. It's rather unsettling, really.

I hate potions. I'm not sure if it's because of the subject matter or the teacher, though. The professor hates me. I recently learned he had some grudge with my parents. Well, specifically my father. I'm not entirely certain what happened between them. But apparently it was a nasty prank gone wrong, and he never forgave my father for it. It seems childish that he would take it out on me. And it seems childish that I would even think he's taking it out on me, I know. But even other students have commented on how horrible he is to me.

As for the other classes, I'm mostly indifferent. Charms is the next best, I suppose. History of Magic is more of a nap time than anything. Herbology is vaguely interesting, but only because I do some gardening at my relatives house over the summer. Mostly not by choice.

I should probably mention that I'm an orphan. My parents died when I was one. I live with my aunt and uncle. They are not very kind to magic. They knew my parents were magical. But they're mostly ignorant of the magical world. They think I'm a freak. It's not all bad,

though. They make me do chores every now and then, but usually they ignore me. I only ever spend a few weeks here in the summer, before usually going to my friend, Ron's, house.

I met the man who was suppose to be my Godfather this year. And another one of my parent's friends. I thought for a bit that I would be going to live with him this summer. But that didn't happen. Maybe it will some day. I don't think it's wise to hold my breath, though.

That's me in a pinch. I'm still not sure what the required length on these things are. But I think this has been a pretty good first letter. I hope you don't disagree. And I hope my writing is not lonely legible, but not awfully boring. I look forward to hearing back from you soon.

Your new Pen Pal.

Harry.

He paused and reread the words a few times. Hoping they were satisfactory. He didn't think it was too poor of a first attempt at a letter. He did some quick editing to it and then reread it one more time. Hedwig hooted in the corner from her cage. Harry laughed and looked up at her.

"Not this time, Hedwig," he said. His snowy owl gave a hoot of displeasure and looked around the room, almost as if she was looking for another courier. He laughed a little bit and stared down at the envelope. "Sorry. It's for an assignment. Some strange pen-pal thing we have to do." He lifted up the envelope and dropped the parchment into it. Nothing happened. He sat for a few minutes and looked at it. He noticed Hedwig lean forward and look at it too, as if she were also expecting something, well, magical to happen. Nothing did. He picked up the envelope and looked at it. Nothing still. He opened it and looked inside. The letter was still just sitting in there. He put it back down and sighed. Hedwig hooted victorious from her perch.

"It doesn't matter," he laughed a little bit. "I don't even know who it's going to. So I can't even have you deliver it." Hedwig just hooted again. For some reason Harry got the feeling that he could probably give the letter to Hedwig and she would do her best to figure out where it was suppose to go, and get it there. She'd probably go and pester McGonagall until she got the answer. Harry laughed a little bit

at that. He stood up and went to his trunk, fetching an owl treat for Hedwig, who hooted lovingly, before staring at the envelope again. He made sure it was sealed with the little clasp and then examined it in his hands. He knew that sometimes charmed objects needed an activation phrase. He held it in his hands and whispered.

"Activate." Nothing happened. He sighed and looked at it again. He could see Hedwig out of the corner of his eyes, stretching her wings luxuriously in an almost taunting manner. He shook his head and got another idea.

"Send," he said softly. He didn't feel anything happen. But when he turned the envelope around he saw the Hogwarts crest on the front of it was glowing. He shrugged and pressed his finger to it. He felt magic radiate out of it for a second, and then the glow vanished. He didn't need to check the inside of the envelope; he knew that the letter had sent. He opened it anyway to check. Sure enough, it was gone. He smiled and laughed a little bit. Hedwig looked annoyed.

"Don't worry, in a few days I'll write to Hermione or Ron and send you off on your way," he said. She perked up a little bit at that. He put the envelope on his small desk, emblem up. He figured that if anyone replied to his letter, that emblem would likely glow as it had when he sent his first letter. He went back to his bed, then, and crawled under the covers. He picked up the text and decided to attempt to get a start on his summer History of Magic reading. He made it to the third page of the chapter before he simply put the book down, turned off the lights, and attempted to drift off to sleep.

Chapter 2

First Response

Harry dreamed.

It was an unpleasant dream. He thought he was a snake. He slithered through strange, dark, house. His thoughts were focused on rats. He caught the scent of one of the rodents and moved after it.

It was too easy to even be fun. The small animal never knew he was there. He devoured it whole, feeling a smug sense of satisfaction as he did. He curled up for a moment in the cold house. It was dusty. Not that he really cared. He was cold then. He vaguely remembered a fire upstairs, by master.

He maneuvered silently through the house. He slid slowly back up the stairs, and then down the long hallway that led to the master bedroom. Inside, master sat in a chair, alone tonight. Master was alone tonight. He curled up into a ball in front of the fire that warmed master. It was much warmer. Much more pleasant. He vaguely remembered he was suppose to be doing something. Waiting for something. What was it? Something about a rat.

Harry woke early the next morning. He sat up. He was breathing hard and feeling rather confused. Still, it wasn't the strangest dream he had ever had. As much as he would have liked to sleep in, he was still in the habit of rising for breakfast and classes at school. And he really didn't want to think about returning to dreams of snakes. He couldn't help but wonder if he and a certainly fictional archaeologist shared similar nightmares.

He knew that Vernon had likely left for work already, and he could faintly hear Dudley's snores from the other bedroom. He didn't quite feel like getting up yet, so instead he picked up the history text and again attempted to get through his assigned reading. He made it to page eight before he decided showering and facing the day was a better idea. At least, he figured, if he kept this rate up, he'd have the assignment done by his birthday.

Hedwig was perched on his desk near where he had placed the enchanted envelope. It gave no sign that anything had been returned to him. Harry felt momentarily foolish for that thought even

occurring to him. Of course his pen pal wouldn't have responded yet. It has been less than twelve hours. And most of those hours were times when most people weren't even awake. In fact, he didn't even know if Beauxbaton's semester had ended. Perhaps the opposing school was still taking their exams. He may not get a reply for weeks.

The owl appeared to be examining the envelope closely. She pecked at it once or twice, carefully, and appeared to be debating what exactly needed to be done about the thing that stole her master's letter.

Harry rose out of bed, moving quietly toward the bathroom to proceed with his normal routine. He enjoyed the warm water in the shower, but did not take the time to enjoy it. Harry showered quickly, despite knowing that Vernon was likely gone, and that Dudley wouldn't wake up until well after noon. He didn't want to risk having someone pounding on the door telling him he'd used far more than enough water. Or question what he was doing in there.

He stepped out of the shower and toweled off. He brushed his teeth, taking longer than he would at school simply because he was enjoying having the bathroom to himself. He combed his hair. Or at least ran the comb through his hair a few times before deciding that it was futile.

Harry slipped back into his room and dressed for the day. He didn't put on anything special. Of course, he realized, he didn't really have anything special. It occurred to him that he probably should go and buy clothing that fit. That presented a dilemma though. He knew that the Dursley's would never take him shopping, or even let him to go London to retrieve money from his vault. Of course, he didn't want the Dursleys' anywhere near the wizard bank.

That simply led to an interesting mental picture of conversations between Vernon and a goblin. The mental images may or may not have wound up with the goblin doing some of the rather cruel things Binns had condemned from the Goblin Wars.

After tossing his pajamas into a corner Harry noticed that the envelope had somehow wound up on the ground next to the desk. He shook his head and laughed a little bit.

"Was that completely necessary?" he asked the owl, who had resumed her spot on her perch. She flexed her wings somewhat menacingly and hooted a little bit. Harry just shook his head, not even bothering to hide the smile on his face as he picked up the envelope and place it back on his desk. Hedwig hooted a bit more and turned her head away.

Harry laughed a and placed his history book on top of the envelope, hoping the near thousand pages of magical historical text would be a deterrent from Hedwig deciding to inflict any sort of harm on his summer homework assignment. He opened a window for her then, not really caring what his relatives thought about having an owl flying around the neighborhood. He doubted anyone would notice anyway. Although, he did briefly wonder, while leaving his room and heading downstairs, about the legality of having an owl as a pet.

The only conclusive answer he came up with as to whether or not it was legal to own an owl in the country was that he didn't care. He decided that as he entered the kitchen and his train of thought turned into what he should consume for breakfast.

Only then did he realize the house seemed rather dark and deserted. He took a moment to investigate. Nothing seemed out of place. He figured he was just more accustomed to the liveliness of school.

Back in the kitchen he decided to make some eggs, mostly because eggs were quick and relatively easy. He took two out of the fridge, wondering how much the Dursley's would yell at him for stealing their food. He was about to start scrambling the eggs when he heard someone coming down the stairs. The steps were far too light to be Dudley.

Sure enough, a few minutes later Petunia stepped into the kitchen. She stared down her nose at him, giving that faux haughty look she loved so much.

"What are you doing?" she spat.

"Scrambling some eggs," Harry replied as he turned back to her to continue cooking. Petunia took a few moments to respond. And when she did, it was certainly not the response Harry had expected.

"Would you mind doing two for me?" she asked. Harry almost couldn't believe what he had heard. He expected to be told to make more for her the second she knew what he was doing. Cooking breakfast for the Dursleys wasn't entirely uncommon. But to have it framed as a question caught him off guard.

"I guess," he said as he turned to look at her. She wasn't paying attention to him. Instead she was taking two more eggs out of the fridge. She then filled the tea pot with water and put it on the stove.

"Thanks." Petunia handed him the two other eggs and he proceeded to begin cooking breakfast. He was silent as he did it. He watched out of the corner of his eye as she took two plates out of the cupboards and placed them on the kitchen table. After that she went and grabbed two tea cups. Harry continued to cook the eggs in silence. Petunia grabbed the water when it was finished and poured two cups. It only took the eggs a few more minutes to scramble. Harry took the skillet straight to the table and divided them equally between he and his aunt. She thanked him again, which just made everything all the more awkward. Harry noticed they had no silverware and grabbed some out of a drawer before sitting down at the table.

They ate quietly. The silence bothered Harry. This was certainly an atypical morning. Harry managed three bites of eggs, and a sip of tea, before he had to know, or at least ask.

"Why are you being nice," he spoke as carefully as he could. Petunia looked at him briefly. She had the look in her eyes that she always had when she was about to say something particularly rude. She opened her mouth to speak. But then thought better of it and instead took another bite of eggs. Harry watched her as she thought up a response.

"Honestly, I'm tired and the thought of food was too good to pass up. Vernon is going to be especially horrible to you this summer," Petunia said slowly, taking a soft sip of tea when she finished.

"How is that any different?" Harry raised an eyebrow as he looked at her. "I doubt anything could be much worse than normal. Hopefully my friends invite me over soon. One of them thinks he can get World Cup tickets," Harry intended for that comment to sound pretentious. But his Aunt simply looked confused.

"You're going to the United States?" she asked. She looked rather surprised.

"What?" Harry asked. Bewildered.

"The World Cup. It's in the United States," she explained. Only then did Harry remember that his aunt would think it was a Muggle sport. It took him a few moments to remember that the World Cup of football must also be that same year.

"Oh no. Not that. The Quidditch World Cup. One of our sports," he explained. Petunia looked at him for a moment, as if she were trying to remember something.

"That's the one played on brooms?"

"Yes,"

"Your mother told me about that. I believe she thought your father was going to become a professional. He must not have been good enough, in the end. Didn't have a job when he died," she said softly. Despite that Harry could tell she was merely thinking aloud, the anger still rushed through him.

"Oh yes. Fighting a war obviously doesn't count as job," Harry spat. He glared up at Petunia. She looked startled for a moment, but regained her composure quickly.

"I didn't mean it like that. It's hard to imagine a war though. Lily never really said what your parents did. Hell, I wasn't even invited to the wedding." Petunia went back to eating her eggs. Harry took a moment to let that sink in.

"Would you have gone?" He asked.

"Of course I would have. She was my only sister and I loved her."

"I'm sorry."

"I am too. You have to understand. Vernon and I hate your world, Harry. I won't even begin to deny that. But we hate your world for entirely different reasons," she put her fork down. Harry put his last

forkful of eggs into his mouth and thought he should have probably made six, rather than four. But his aunt's comments intrigued him. Wasn't he just wondering what people could have known about his parents? Sure, his aunt had always snapped at him, and simply told him to drop the subject, usually in ways involving locking him under the stairs. But, then again, he'd never asked after he'd been to school.

"What do you mean?" He spoke slowly, half expecting that he would be informed that it was none of his business.

"Well, Vernon hates you because you are a constant reminder that there are people more talented, more gifted, and more special than he could ever be. He doesn't understand why you have abilities he does not, why you can do things he can't. He was so mean because, deep down, he's jealous," she explained.

"Jealous?" Harry snorted.

"Is it so hard to imagine? I was terribly jealous of Lily when she got that letter and I didn't. Think of what it must be like to know that other people have magical powers and you do not. What makes them so special? And the worst part is, you can't even tell anyone about it, or rant to anyone because the world you are ranting about doesn't exist. People just think you're mad for believing in fairy tales," she laughed hollowly.

"I'd rather have had my family than magic," Harry retorted. Petunia just smiled at him. A pained smile that Harry couldn't decipher.

"You say that. And it may be true. But would you rather know about magic, and not be able to use it, family or not?"

"Yes, if I had my family," he replied automatically. Deep down, though, he wasn't so sure. He remembered how students treated Filch. That must be a strange existence. But, like most near fourteen year old boys, his sense of empathy wasn't fully developed.

"A mature answer, Harry. And likely the correct one. Jealousy may be petty, but it exists in many forms, and you will do well to learn to spot it," she spoke sagely. It didn't suit her. Harry still was having a hard time believing it.

"I always thought he was just annoyed at having another mouth to feed, and ward to shelter. Like my presence prevented him from doing what he wanted."

"It has," Petunia said quietly. "But not in the ways Vernon makes it sound. I can't fully explain it. But when you were brought here, your kind did something to the house. Through the duration of your schooling we can't move. Vernon wanted to, and could afford to, years ago," she explained. Harry felt that was a very petty reason.

"But he always clamors on about how much money I cost! And how I have to work to earn my keep!"

"He lies. We receive a stipend from your family vault, as I believe it's called, every month you live here. And we have access to those funds if the need should arise."

"You what?" Harry exclaimed. "You have access to my money?" He felt the rage course through him. He could feel his magic coming out. It was Aunt Marge all over again. "You've been paid for watching me?"

"Calm down, Harry," she snapped, which just made him more angry.

"No. You've lied to me for years, made me feel useless, stolen my money!" He rose to his feet as he yelled. He wanted his wand immediately. He wanted to hex his aunt. She remained calm.

"Harry. I know you hate Vernon as well. But we didn't steal your money," she explained. He just snorted. "Besides some rather nasty threats from your kind if any financial irregularities appeared in the numbers, Vernon is an honorable businessman. He's not about to steal things from his nephew," Petunia defended her husband. Harry snorted when she finished. He figured the threats were more likely to stop Vernon than any sense of honor. He did manage to reign in his magic, then. Mostly because he remembered he was on thin ice in that department.

"Okay. Fine. I'll believe you for now. But I'll investigate that the first chance I get," he hoped his threat didn't sound as empty to Petunia as it did to himself.

"Of course," Petunia added, "It is just another contributing factor to the jealousy. Knowing you'll be wealthy as soon as you come of age." They were silent for a few moments then. To Harry's surprise she picked up the plates and moved toward the sink, rather than simply ordering him to clean them. The kitchen was silent for a moment before Harry spoke.

"Well. If Vernon hates me out of jealousy, why do you hate me?" He asked. Petunia dropped a plate into the sink.

"I hate your world, Harry," she paused. "Because it took away my sister."

"How? Because she died?"

"No. We lost her well before that. Your world does not mingle with ours. We were the closest friends. But then she was only home for the summers an holiday. Then it was simply the summers, and even then she'd be more absorbed in her work, trying to get back to magic. After a while it became clear that she wanted absolutely no part of this world anymore. She wrote to me, on occasion, but that was it. No matter how hard I tried, the magical world was always more appealing to her. I can't say that I really blame her, but that was painful." She finished washing the dishes in silence. Harry didn't have memories of really losing his family, but he had certainly lost friends, albeit it only for a time. That pain he could understand.

He simply sat and contemplated for a few moments. Would friends of his turn out the same? Would Hermione wind up distanced from her Parents? Could the same thing have happened to the Creevey's, had they not both been magical? He certainly didn't want to think so. After a minute he said the only thing he could think of.

"I'm sorry," the obligatory, uncomfortable answer was the best solace he could offer.

"Again, Harry, so am I."

"So, why are you being so nice?" He repeated his earlier question. He could hear the smile on her face when she next spoke.

"I hate Marge every bit as much as you do. When she talks about my sister I wouldn't mind blowing her up myself." Harry couldn't help

but laugh. He was stunned. She spoke again almost immediately. "Now go run along. I do suggest staying out of Dudley and Vernon's way as much as possible."

"I always do," he replied.

He passed the day with typical, out of the house activities. He spent most of it wandering around the general area and wondering about what his Aunt had said earlier. He spotted Hedwig once or twice, and wondered just how often she followed him around over the summer. He knew he likely wouldn't be missed at dinner time, so he simply stayed in a park and watched other children and families. He didn't particularly pay attention to the other families, being too absorbed in his own thoughts, but there was something soothing about simply being there.

He wandered home before dark. He assumed the Dursley's would be wasting away in front of the television in the front room of the house. A quick glance in the front window confirmed it. So instead of walking directly into their wrath, he went around the back, and slipped in quietly.

"Boy!" he heard Vernon yell. Apparently he hadn't been quiet enough.

"Yes?" Harry yelled back, figuring at least admitting to it would be better than having Vernon assume someone had broken in.

"What are you doing, coming in the back door like that! Trying to sneak around like a criminal?" Vernon yelled. Harry poked his head around the stairs and peered into the room. Vernon and Dudley were still entirely focused on the television, but Petunia peered at him over her magazine, looking annoyed in general.

"I, uh, I didn't want to disturb you?" Harry admitted weakly. It wasn't that poor of an excuse, he thought. And perhaps if the Dursley's were distracted enough they wouldn't question him too much about it.

"Oh, right, Go to your room, Boy," Vernon commanded. Harry just shrugged and walked up the stairs. Part of him was tempted to disobey, or comment that he was thinking about writing a letter to

Sirius, but at that point his room was his goal anyway, so he walked up to it.

It was exactly as he had left it earlier in the day. He casually flipped on Dudley's old television and surfed through the channels for a minute. Nothing was particularly interesting so he muted it and went over to his desk. He carefully lifted the history book off of the envelope. It was still empty.

Hedwig picked that moment to fly back into his room. She hooted once, and looked at the envelope then hooted again.

"Yes, I know. You would have delivered the letter, and received the reply by now," he admitted, knowing that such a thing was impossible. Hedwig hooted her confirmation. Harry smirked at her and took out some parchment and a quill. He scribbled a letter to Ron. It wasn't anything deep. He merely stated that his relatives didn't seem to be abnormally bad this summer, although it had only been a day. And he asked Ron to keep him in the loop about the World Cup, and hopefully being able to spend a portion of the holiday at the Burrow. He signed it and rolled it up. After a moment he noticed Hedwig was still gazing disdainfully at the envelope, her eyes gradually moving back to the letter in his hand.

"This one is all yours, girl," he said. Hedwig hooted lovingly as Harry gave her the letter. "Take it to Ron at the Burrow, okay?" The owl just looked at him for a moment, blinked in confirmation and flew out the window. Harry laughed a little bit. He probably should have written to Hermione. She would have appreciated the irony of simply writing a letter to provide amusement for a pet. He decided to work on another summer assignment, then. He didn't feel like reading his history book, so he dug through his trunk for another piece of homework. Transfiguration was what he found first. And while that wasn't particularly appealing, he knew it would be better to get started earlier on his transfiguration assignment. Next to Snape's, McGonagall's would probably be the toughest to do.

The transfiguration professor didn't let him down, either. The assignment was an analysis of theories of transfiguration. He had to read three separate theories, each of which had to be about fifty pages of his text, and then pick the one they preferred and write a convincing argument as to why. Harry read the instructions again and just laughed quietly to himself. Only McGonagall would assign

something like that. He could already picture a frightened Ron's face when he realized that he had all of that to do. Of course, Hermione would help him; she always helped both of them out. And Harry doubted he'd get a very good start on it. But at least he was making the effort.

He actually got much more done than he expected he would. He wasn't particularly sure who wrote the first theory he had to read, but the author had done an exceptional job phrasing the arguments. It was easy to read, and more importantly, it made sense. He looked up from it when he heard a slight buzzing sound from the vicinity of his desk. He saw the Hogwarts crest on his envelope was glowing.

Why he felt a sudden rush of trepidation was beyond him. Should he be worried that his pen pal hated his first letter? Probably not. It was just an assignment, after all. Yet, that prefect had said that they were matched based on interests and similarities, so he should be able to find something to discuss with the foreigner.

He slowly stood and moved toward the envelope. He looked at it for a minute before sitting back down on his bed. He very carefully opened it and looked inside. There was indeed parchment inside. He took it out and examined it. His pen pal had very pretty handwriting. He started to read then.

Dear Harry,

Your writing is legible enough, although I assume they do not have a penmanship course at Hogwarts. I must admit that you are correct. That was a terrible way to start a letter. But I doubt that I would have come up with anything better. I must thank you for writing so promptly. My friends were jealous that I had already received a letter when our assignment was handed out today.

I will start by addressing the points you brought up in your letter. Like your rambling, I apologize in advance if my writing is subpar. English is my second language. I should ask, but I feel I already know the answer. Écrivez-vous Français?

I do know what a Gryffindor is. I have a friend who attends Hogwarts. She just finished her fifth year and is in Ravenclaw. Perhaps you know her? I will be spending a week in Florence with her this

summer. I do not quite understand the entire concept of houses though. At Beauxbatons we are arranged by gender and year.

Now, before delve more into your interests, I must know. Are you Harry Potter? I notice you did not give a last name in your letter. But a quick look into my Contemporary Magical History text shows that Harry Potter would have just finished his third year. And he is also an orphan and his parents died when he was won. Désolé, Harry, but if you are attempting to hide your identity, I'd leave out the orphan bit. Of course, Harry could simply just be a popular name across the channel.

I am not particularly interested in Quidditch. I do enjoy flying, but I don't care for sports. However, if you do go to the World Cup I am obliged to mention that I hope England gets soundly defeated. Preferably by the French, but I'd settle for any colonial French country.

I haven't introduced myself. Je m'appelle Fleur. Fleur Delacour. I am a bit older than you. I will be starting my final year at Beauxbatons and I will turn seventeen just before the year commences. I will admit, my friends thought it was most amusing that I got such a young pen pal. We were all surprised. You write well for your age. It's refreshingly mature.

You proceeded along with classes. My personal favorite is charms. I like charming things. It's amazing what can be done with the charms. Simple items can gain hundreds of uses. It's fascinating. Transfiguration is tolerable, but only if you're transfiguring things into items to be charmed.

I agree with you on potions, but I do not have a vendetta with the professor. I just have no patience for brewing.

I find it hard to be bored by history. Our class focuses on great events from both magical and non-magical histories, and often shows how the communities affect each other. Of course, my friend at Hogwarts said your professor tends to drone on about giants or goblins or something or other. Our history class also focuses on theories about the actual history of magic, and why it exists at all.

Divination is not an elective here. It is a specialty class that one is only admitted to if they have shown some previous clairvoyant

abilities. I believe there are three students in the entire school who are taking it.

Our Dark Arts class is focused heavily on theory and counter theory. It's text heavy and we perform little magic in it.

We are also required to take classes in French and another language, as well as compulsory courses on the non-magical world. We can choose to add Runes or Arithmancy after our third year, where we can also choose to drop another subject. I dropped Potions for Runes. I believe it is better that way. I have no intention of becoming a potions mistress, why should I have to learn how to brew the draught of living death. In fact, why should anyone have to learn how to brew that?

And that's Fleur Delacour, as you said, in a pinch. A strange colloquialism, but I believe I understand it.

I am sorry about your Godfather. Although, I am curious to know just who Harry Potter's Godfather is. The rest of the magical world thought your non-magical relatives were your only living familial connection. Of course, if you aren't Harry Potter I will look like a fool. But there just seem to be too many coincidences there.

It appears we received similar vague instructions for this assignment. I felt your letter was very nice, though, and hope that mine is the same.

Adieu,

Fleur Delacour.

She had signed her name with a brilliant flourish. Harry stared at the letter for a few moments. He reread it quickly and then dropped it onto the bed. This assignment had seemed easy at first, but what was he going to write to a sixteen, near seventeen year old witch? That certainly didn't seem like assigned by interests and age. It would figure he'd wind up the outlier for that.

Harry moved the letter back to his desk and debated exactly what he should write back to her. Nothing really came to him, so instead he attempted to go back to his homework. That didn't work really well. So he gave up and simply watched TV until he fell asleep.

Author's Note: I feel it's important to note that Fleur was not going to be his pen pal when I planned the story. His original one was going to be Lilly Selsion (The prefect who gave him the assignment). But, I decided most readers likely wouldn't be interested in a letter conversation between a 'Lilly' and Harry that may encompass a large chunk of the start of the story. So I threw her in as a Hogwarts student. I debated making a Beauxbatons boy with similar interests, but that had the same problem. Eventually, I decided it should simply be Fleur.

Expect similar chapter length until Harry gets to school, where I plan on increasing it by about 3000 words a chapter, if not more.

Thanks for the reviews and support, I appreciate every one.

Chapter 3

Correspondence

Fleur Delacour sat at a small table outside of a little Italian café. She fanned herself gently in the warm summer heat. She tossed her silvery blond hair over her shoulder and admired the architecture around her. She had to admire the De Medici's, they certainly had built some amazing things in their day. They had just visited one of the Medici Palaces. It was glorious. After a few moments of admiration, her friend returned with their cappuccino.

"Thanks Lilly," Fleur said. She spoke in French. Lilly preferred Italian, but they were both fluent in each language. There were even points where they'd converse with each other in two different languages.

"No problem," Lilly responded, sticking to French. She sat across from her friend. "So did he write you back yet?"

"I haven't checked since this morning, Lilly," Fleur laughed. "What with the dragging to Museums and the culture it hasn't been high on my list of things to do."

"Hey, those last museums were your idea," Lilly laughed.

"I suppose they were. Oh well, you enjoyed them too."

"Oh yes, nothing like looking at old paintings for five hours," Lilly replied sarcastically.

"Well it beats shopping," Fleur responded.

"You don't mean that."

"Okay, you're right. I don't. Shopping is a blast," Fleur admitted. "But when my father gave me vault access, I doubt he intended for me to go to Gucci and Prada."

"Maybe not," Lilly shrugged, as if she couldn't see just why that wasn't a good idea. Fleur decided to change the subject.

"So you really think he's Harry Potter?" Fleur asked again.

"For like the hundredth time. Yes. There's only one Gryffindor Harry that I know of, and that's Potter. And everything else fits." Lilly ran her hand through her hair briefly. Fleur looked around at the architecture for another moment before she turned back to her friend.

"What do you know about him?" She asked as she swept her hair out of her face again.

"Not much really. He's an excellent seeker. If he would put in more time he could probably have a shot at going professional. In the inter-house championship he costs Gryffindor nearly as many points as he wins, but almost always finds a way to make up for it. He's quiet. He doesn't have many close friends, but most people are at least indifferent to him. There's another boy in his year, a Draco Malfoy, who tends to go out of his way to antagonize him. Pulled a completely disgraceful stunt at a Quidditch match last year. Every year it seems some strange rumors pop up around him. I don't know if I've ever even directly spoken to him," Lilly explained.

"What did he do?" Fleur asked.

"Malfoy? Oh he and some members of the Slytherin Quidditch team dressed up as Dementors and wandered on to the field during his match against Hufflepuff last year. Caused quite a bit of fright," Lilly laughed a little at the memory.

"That's horrible!" Fleur exclaimed.

"Yes. Harry reacted magnificently, though. Shot a full Patronus Charm at them. They ran around like chickens with their heads cut off for a few minutes. Was rather funny."

"A patronus?" Fleur asked, sounding skeptical. "At his age?" She had conjured her first Patronus Charm at thirteen, but she was extraordinary at anything remotely related to charms.

"Yea it was impressive. Ran them down and everything."

"Well if he can do that so young he's rather talented," Fleur admitted. "Many of age wizards can't even cast that charm."

"I know I can't," Lilly admitted.

"You said he's involved in rumors?"

"Yea, every year. I don't know if he ever has anything to do with them. But his first year, well, there's a rumor he killed the defense professor," Lilly paused just to see Fleur's shocked reaction.

"How does something like that get started?" Fleur was completely aghast.

"Well, one day, toward the end of term, Professor Quirrell just wasn't at meal times and Harry Potter was in the hospital wing. Harry and his friends all received a massive amount of points for protecting the school from something. No mention of Quirrell again."

"That's very strange." Fleur couldn't imagine something like that happening at Beauxbatons.

"Yea, then the next year, that was the year with the whole Chamber of Secrets debacle I wrote to you about. Well, turns out he's a parselmouth, so everyone thought he was the 'Heir of Slytherin' that was attacking the Muggle-borns. Well, end of the term his best friend's sister is taken down into the chamber. Everyone assumes she's dead. School is set to be closed. Next morning, Ginny is back and Harry Potter and Ron Weasley are receiving awards for services to the school. No one is quite sure what happened down there. And asking certainly didn't help." Lilly laughed a little bit. She recalled what happened when Roger Davies asked Professor Flitwick about why the awards were given. Watching her team captain run around the lake singing 'Under the Sea' as loud as he can had been worth it. Cheering charms that powerful certainly had amusing consequences.

"That is strange," Fleur said, wrinkling her forehead as she thought about that story. "And last year?"

"I'd have thought that one obvious. Sirius Black, of course," Lilly said.

"The mass-murderer? What about him?"

"Well he wanted to kill Harry Potter, of course. Why else would he break out and why else was there massive amounts of security around the school?"

"I don't know. Because there was security everywhere? Ever wonder where that security went?" Fleur asked.

"Not really," Lilly admitted. "But that was just the rumor around school. Maybe they just figured if Black escaped Dementors once, they weren't the best way to try to track him down?"

"Probably something like that. For all we know Sirius Black is that stray over there begging from that woman for her bread," Fleur joked. She didn't notice that the dog turned and look at her after she spoke. Lilly laughed a little bit.

"You're probably right. Anyway, speaking of bread, I think I'll grab us some from that bakery there, it smells delicious." Lilly stood and walked over toward the shop. Fleur watched her purchase the bread and walk back. Lilly passed her a chunk before she sat back down at the table.

"Thanks," Fleur said, taking as she took a quick bite. Lilly nodded and did the same. "You know, I never did ask, how's your pen pal?"

"He finally wrote back to me. Durmstrang, naturally. The entire letter just talked about Viktor Krum and how the Bulgarians are going to win the World Cup and how Viktor Krum is the best player ever. Bit annoying, really."

"I bet. Not like you even care about Viktor Krum," Fleur smirked. "I hear you're more into chasers." She was surprised when Lilly actually blushed.

"Oh come on. I just ran into him, completely accidentally, on a street. I didn't even recognize him!"

"How could you not? He's practically your idol!"

"Oh I wasn't paying attention."

"Obviously. So what's the plan for the rest of the day?"

"Well I was going to suggest shopping," Lilly teased. Fleur laughed.

"That sounds perfectly acceptable. Just please, Lilly, don't try to convince me that I must have that Gucci dress this time," Fleur begged.

"Your father let you keep it last time," Lilly countered.

"Yea with no allowance for six months." They both laughed.

The girls finished their coffee and stood to leave. The stray ceased begging a few tables away and trotted after them for a bit. Fleur realized she still had a small hunk of bread in her hand. She laughed a little bit and spoke to the animal.

"Fine, but only because you're cute," she said, which caused her friend to laugh more. The dog barked happily and ran off with the bread firmly in its jaws.

Hundreds of miles away the summer passed relatively uneventfully for Harry Potter. Hedwig returned from Ron without any reply. His bird seemed annoyed. Harry got the feeling that Ron probably sent her away saying he'd write eventually, if he knew more.

The Dursley's remained pretty normal. He hadn't expected a sweeping change from Petunia after that morning conversation, and none had come. Perhaps, he thought, she simply was as annoyed with Marge's comments as he was. He didn't bother to think much more on it. Mostly because later that day Dudley showed his parents his marks for the year. Apparently, there was a scathing note from the school nurse, and now Harry focused more on ways to get edible food since Dudley's diet had started. Sure, grapefruits were delicious, but it was incredibly hard to subsist on a quarter of a slice of one.

He was glad Hedwig had returned quickly, as he immediately sent her out to his friends with requests for food. And, thanks to his friends, he now had a secret stash of wizard and Muggle candy. He was munching carelessly on some every flavored beans as he worked through his summer potions essay.

It occurred to him that he had never had a summer potions assignment returned to him. He wondered if Snape bothered to even read them, or simply just enjoyed torturing students with absurd holiday assignments. Dudley never seemed to get homework over

the summer. He felt monetarily envious of him for that. But then Harry realized that Dudley probably just didn't do any of the summer assignments.

He went back to the potions essay, somewhat annoyed that Snape was making the entire year write about the possible negative side effects of the Wolfsbane potion. Maybe it was actually in the curriculum, but Harry expected that it was simply an extension of his hatred for Professor Lupin.

His Birthday was tomorrow, too. He hoped Hedwig would return quickly. He expected, or at least hoped, he'd have to send a few thank you notes to some well-wishers. Of course, he realized it was rather silly to want his owl back solely to send her off again. But he did value the companionship of the pet. It may have been strange, but she was the closest thing to a family member he really had. Sure, the Weasley's filled in for time to time, but that certainly wasn't the same. Perhaps Sirius would be able to fill that void eventually.

Fortunately for Harry, Hedwig took that moment to arrive back at Privet Drive. Harry could tell by the package she was carrying that Hermione more than came through on the special, non food related request, he had sent to her. Hedwig flew through the window and dropped the package onto his bed before landing next to him and staring at his trunk, looking annoyed.

Harry couldn't help but laugh. He stood and proceeded to find a couple of owl treats in his trunk and gave them to his exhausted looking owl. She ate the treats quickly before resting on the perch. She gave an annoyed hoot when she noticed that Harry hadn't opened the package yet.

He picked up the letter that was on top of it and started to read.

Harry!

I am so thrilled that you have decided to take up a second language! How much do you know already? Anything? Although, you really should do it because of the importance of bilingualism, not as a vain attempt to impress your French pen pal.

I know, that's not what you said you wanted to learn French for, but you're my best friend and I can read through the lines. Of course, it

doesn't help your cause that you asked me what you should say to impress a sixteen, near seventeen, year old witch. Although, I bet you're wishing you paid more attention to Professor Flitwick.

Oh and Happy Birthday! I imagine Hedwig will get back to you about the time of your birthday. My parents made her stay the night after she arrived. They think your owl is just gorgeous. They set out a bowl of water and some food for her. She acted somewhat like a spoiled princess, but with the way my parents were fawning over her I'm not surprised. By the way, please don't tell Hedwig I said that. She's likely to bite me the next time you send me a letter then!

I wanted to send you a cake. With what you said about Dudley's new diet I figured you would appreciate that. I was arguing with my parents about it. You know how they are with sugar, and really anything unhealthy for your teeth (they do have a point though! Don't just eat sweets!) but these French books will be a much better gift.

My pen pal is a girl from Durmstrang. I get the feeling she doesn't really like me all that much. I've already sent her three letters. She's our age, I think. She says nothing about school, and answers my questions somewhat rudely.

You aren't really going to be able to learn the language just by a dictionary and some phrase books, though. We can work more on it when we get back to school. Maybe Professor Dumbledore will let us start a French Language club!

Lots of love,

Hermione

Harry groaned a little upon finishing the letter. He should have expected that. He half expected she'd be sending Ron French books as well. He opened the package then. He couldn't help but smile. He'd asked if she had a spare French-English dictionary in his letter, and inside was a brand new one, as well as a French phrase book, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince*, what he assumed was a low level French textbook, and what appeared to be a traveler's guide to Paris.

He opened up the phrase book and began to peek through it. He wasn't sure if it would be helpful, really, but it was worth a shot. As he paged through the text he found himself confirming his original view. But, he figured, at the very least he would be able to ask someone how to find the bathroom, if he ever crossed the channel.

He was too tired to get far enough into the phrase book to really accomplish anything, and soon enough he found himself drifting off to sleep.

He awoke with a very large and very colorful bird on his bed. That was slightly surprising. It had a large parcel and a note and appeared to want payment. He found some coins and deposited them into a pouch on its leg. It made a strange screech and flew out the window. Hedwig stared after it with a curious expression. The note with the package was very short.

Happy Birthday Harry!

You have no idea how good it feels to finally be able to at least write that to you. Hopefully, next year, I'll be able to say it to your face. I appreciate your last letter. Again, I can't tell you where I am in case the owl goes off course.

I picked up this cake in a local Muggle bakery here. I have no idea if it is any good, but I broke down and bought some muffins as well, and they were delicious. At the very least it will help you with the problem of your cousin's diet, I hope. Even though James and I use to joke that a full cake is a single server, I advise that you don't eat it all in one sitting, it looks very rich. I can mostly be myself here, as no one appears to be looking for me, but I tend to avoid it, as well as people, as much as possible.

Remember, let me know if anything strange arises. I hope your summer isn't too terrible.

Padfoot.

Harry put the letter down and opened the neatly packaged box. The bird had kept the cake in wonderful shape. It did indeed look rich, chocolate cake with chocolate icing. He'd even had it customized with a 'Happy Birthday Harry' in green icing on it. It looked absolutely delicious, too.

A few minutes after Sirius's bird left a basic brown owl arrived, likely just one of Hogwarts's birds, bearing a birthday note from Hagrid as well as some of his favorite cooked concoctions. Harry debated giving them to Petunia and insisting they'd help on Dudley's diet. But he wasn't that mean.

After Hagrid's owl, Errol arrived, looking completely depleted. He dropped his package and immediately started drinking from Hedwig's water bowl. The snowy owl mostly ignored the older bird. Harry skimmed the note with that package. It seemed Ron had informed Mrs. Weasley about his new diet. She was appalled and had created what appeared to be a week's worth of meals. He smirked a little bit, thinking that it would be the first summer he could remember where he ate better and more often than Dudley. Perhaps there was a little bit of justice in the world.

He scribbled a quick thank you to Hagrid, Hermione, and Mrs. Weasley. He gave the first two to Hedwig, who flew off on her way with an annoyed hoot. She would have probably liked more time to rest. He left the reply for the Weasley's with Errol because he figured the old owl would take it whenever he decided to take the return trip home.

He could hear Venron and Petunia starting to stir in their bedroom and decided he didn't want to be in the house when they awoke. He grabbed the new French dictionary and phrase book, along with some parchment, a pen, a couple of chocolate frogs, a cauldron cake, and the assignment envelope and quickly left his room and ventured out of the house.

He wandered around Little Whinging for about an hour, not really having any idea where he wanted to go. He wished he had some Muggle money to stop in a coffee shop or a small store to buy something, just to kill time.

Instead, he found himself in the park. He sat at a picnic table and gazed around. There was next to no life in the entire neighborhood. Some of the neighbors, no doubt ones who were convinced he was an insane delinquent, watched him curiously as he walked by. But that was the extent of the action in Little Whinging that morning. He glanced around the empty park. No doubt some families would come occupy it soon.

He opened a chocolate frog and expertly snagged it before it jumped away. He ate it slowly, and marveled at the chocolate melting in his mouth. After a moment he picked up the card from inside the package. Circe. He didn't need to read the description witch who enslaved Odysseus and turned sailors into pigs. He did take a moment to admire the pretty Grecian though.

After he disposed of the wrappings he opened the French-English dictionary and started to page through it. After a moment he took out the parchment and his pen and started to compose his second letter.

Dear Fleur,

Je non ecrire Francois, mais je suis en train du apprendre.

That's probably terrible. I thought a second language wouldn't be that hard to learn, but it appears I was wrong. For my birthday, which is today, a friend of mine sent me a bunch of books that look helpful. I'm not sure how much I'll be able to get done myself, but my friend seems keen on helping me with it when we get back to school.

I'm celebrating my birthday by leaving my relatives and hiding in a park. It's a warm day here. I'll probably have to find some shade in a few hours to stand the heat. But for now the picnic table in the empty park will suffice. I plan on eating some Chocolate Frogs and the Cauldron Cake that I brought, write a letter to the only French witch I know, and attempt to decipher these language text books. Hopefully by the time I return home I'll be able to form a coherent sentence.

I'll answer your first question. I hoped it wouldn't come out.

Yes, I am Harry Potter. But there isn't anything special about that. I'm famous for 'stopping' a dark wizard, who is probably still alive somewhere. I did nothing, really. I probably cried in a crib while my parents sacrificed themselves. They are the heroes, not me. It's a little whiney, I suppose, but it is rather unpleasant being famous for something that I can't remember, and didn't even know happened until I was eleven.

Imagine my surprise, after spending a decade residing in a tiny storage space underneath a staircase; I discover I'm a 'hero' to an entire hidden society that I know absolutely nothing about?

I do like Professor Dumbledore. But isn't there something else he could have done? Living with Muggles who absolutely despise even the faintest concept of magic is absurd. There really had to be a better alternative. I mean in my second year there was a Muggle-born first year that had more knowledge of me, and the Wizarding world, than I did.

But even then I'm kept out. I know that must sound strange. But I am. I have a large pile of money in a bank that I never heard anything about until I was eleven, and still never hear anything about. Muggle banks send statements. Do Wizarding ones not do that? Even now I'm more comfortable in the Muggle world. At least there I know how most things are suppose to function. As far as I know I'm the last remaining Potter and I have absolutely no idea what could have even been left to me!

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to go on like that. People just think that Harry Potter is some sort of Rock Star, and in reality he's a confused teenager who isn't really sure what's going on in either of the worlds he occupies. Of course, people are usually too busy staring at my forehead to even realize that I answered their question, or that I am incredibly uncomfortable being interrogated about it. They've actually asked me, "what was it like?" I mean, really? I was one. I don't remember what it was like.

There are people at school who hate me because I'm Harry Potter. Like they assume my life is easier than theirs, and that being Harry Potter is awesome. They don't realize I grew up a lonely orphan that had no idea of fame, and that I'm so uncomfortable with that aspect of my life I can't even talk about it with my best friends.

I'm sorry, I just went right back to the same topic. I'm going to eat the Cauldron Cake I mentioned and act like a Muggle at a park for a bit before continuing.

He put his pen down and reread the letter while taking out the cake. He ate the cake slowly after he finished reading. He sounded whinier than he liked. But he felt it needed to be said. He could picture Fleur, well, a made up standard French girl, she looked a lot like Katie Bell in his head, blabbing away about how she got to write to the famous 'Harry Potter.' He had almost told her about what he heard around Dementors too, but he figured that sentence was

beast as is. Of course, he couldn't be sure if that was an actual memory, or just what he imagined happened.

Perhaps he was being too critical. But, then again, everyone that ever met him stared at the scar. He couldn't walk down Diagon Alley without having people stare at him. He hated it. He couldn't help but wonder how different things would have been had he known at a younger age. Had he grown up the famous Harry Potter, would he still have the same friends and interests?

He assumed, at the very least, that he would have seen that Draco Malfoy had only wanted to be friends with him because he was Harry Potter. But, then again, would he have been so happy to have Ron even speak to him? He certainly wouldn't have been saved by the Weasley's on the platform.

He heard laughing from across the park. He looked up and saw a young woman had entered the park with a child. The child was probably five or six, the young woman in her late teens or early twenties. He didn't recognize her. Then again, that didn't surprise him. He didn't get out in the neighborhood much.

He watched the two play for a bit, smiling at the child's amusement by simple activities, like playing on a see-saw or even taking a turn on the swings. When he felt like a creep for watching for too long he went back to his books. He looked at the letter briefly. He couldn't think of anything else to send her at that moment, so instead he opened up the French text and read the first few pages. It was basic stuff, mostly, bon jour, ça va, bien, et tu, things he could figure out on his own. Some basic vocabulary followed. He was lost in the text, trying to memorize the words, when a voice interrupted his work.

"Hey, sorry, I didn't see you there. Hope we aren't bothering you!" the young woman said. Harry looked up at her. She had moved over toward his picnic table as the child, a young boy, had started to play in a sandbox near him.

"Oh no," Harry said, looking surprised. He paused for a moment. It had been so long since he interacted with non-magical people he almost didn't know how to act. She looked at him funnily for a moment before he continued. "It's fine. I'm just doing some reading."

"What are you reading?" she asked. Her eyes glanced down toward the books, briefly, as she sat on the top of the picnic table. She then focused her attention back on the child. It's just an introductory French book. Wanted to try to learn a second language," he replied.

"A noble pursuit," she responded. Harry got the feeling that she wasn't really paying attention to him, but merely creating conversation while she watched the kid. "I took Latin in school. Was easy. Didn't have to speak it." Harry was silent for a moment. He closed the book and looked up at her. She was pretty, with long black hair and pale eyes. She looked bored, though.

"I don't know any Latin. I'm not even sure what it would sound like," he lied. But then again, he wasn't sure the occasional spell incantation counted as knowing Latin.

"Like any other language, really. But it's not spoke now, so teachers usually aren't picky," she responded.

"Still. It's a little strange, don't you think? I mean you just know some words of everything, regardless, like oui, adios, and guten tag. I can't do that with Latin."

"Odi et amo, quare id faciam, fortasse requiris. Nescio sed fieri sentio et excrucior," she responded. Harry blinked.

"Sorry, what?"

"Oh nothing," She laughed a little bit and gave him a full smile. "That's just some Latin for you."

"I see. I'm Harry, by the way," He said. He decided not to give his surname incase she thought he attended St. Brutus's.

"Lyn," she responded. "Henry's babysitter."

"Are you from the neighborhood?" Harry asked.

"Moved here two years ago," she responded. "And you?"

"Lived here all my life, but I spend most of the time at a boarding school," Harry responded.

"Oh? Where's that?"

"Err....It's in Scotland," He responded.

"Oh, that's cool," Lyn responded. She then checked her watch. "Henry's parents will be home soon so I should walk him home." She stood and went to fetch the kid before giving him a slight wave and walking off down the street, chatting happily with the child as she did.

Harry watched for a moment. She hadn't asked about the scar, of course, she hadn't really looked at him. Still, it was nice, despite the fact that it confirmed he was more comfortable in the Muggle world than the Wizarding one.

He went back to the French text for a bit. It only took a few minutes for him to become bored with drilling the same vocabulary words over and over again. He moved onto the next chapter, which consisted mostly of translating some basic conversational French like 'how are you.' After another Chocolate Frog, Rowena Ravenclaw this time, he decided to return to the letter.

So, I took a little break and did some of the French text book my friend got me. I'm rather embarrassed by my earlier attempts at stringing together words. I'm tempted to cross it all out, as I can already tell that simply looking up words in a dictionary and stringing them together is not the best way to compose a sentence.

Of course, if I were using a pencil I could just erase it. I've wondered, do you use quills to write at Beauxbatons? Pens are so much more efficient. It took me at least a month to get use to dipping and writing with a quill at Hogwarts. I can't believe that they haven't picked up on some of the new technology. I mean, pens aren't even that complicated. In fact, the ones in the clear cases pretty much show you everything involved.

Anyway. I realized I'm being incredibly self-centered in this letter. You mentioned a friend at Hogwarts (who you didn't name, so I can't claim that I know her, although I do only know a few Ravenclaws) who you were traveling to Florence with sometime this summer. Well, how did that go? I'm actually totally envious. I've never been off this island. Traveling has to be a blast. Isn't the leaning tower of Pisa there? Well, actually, I know it's in Pisa, but isn't Pisa right by

Florence? My Italian geography is bad. In fact, now that I think about it, my geography in general is bad.

You also haven't really told me anything about your life in France. Where do you live? I live in a suburb of London called Little Whinging. It, a little bit of London, and a castle up in Scotland are about all I know. I'd like to travel. My friend also sent me a travel guide to Paris that I'm going to page through later today. The first couple of pictures I looked at are amazing, though!

What's your family like? Do you have any siblings? What do you do for fun? Tell me more about Fleur!

Sincerely,

Harry Potter.

He read the letter once more. He felt he needed more at the end, but struggled to think of anything else to add. He realized he asked Fleur about her interests, but wasn't really sure what he would answer. What did he do for fun? Summers at the Dursley's his main recreational activity was, well, avoiding the Dursleys. If he went to the burrow he usually just played Quidditch with Ron and his brothers or helped with work around the house. At school, well, he wandered around and got into trouble. Mostly unintentionally.

He hoped that Fleur would at least be more interesting than him.

After a few quick revisions he folded the parchment so it would fit into the envelope and sent it on its way. He was glad Hedwig wasn't around to hoot at him for not utilizing her services.

He looked around the park again. It had filled up in the time it took him to write the letter.

He watched some younger kids play tag in the center of the park for a few minutes. Harry was almost tempted to join in. Instead he started to page absently through the tourist guide of Paris that Hermione bought him. Mostly, he just looked at the pictures.

As he started to feel hungry, though, he turned to the restaurant section and read reviews there. That didn't help with his hunger. He kept reading, anyway, not really caring that it just made him hungrier.

About an hour passed with him simply paging through the book. Children continued to play happily in the park and Harry felt mostly normal. At least until he noticed Dudley and his gang were approaching.

He saw one of the kids playing tag run into Dudley. A moment later Piers pushed the kid to the ground and said something that made the rest of the gang laugh. Harry stood, gathered up his books and moved toward them. Dudley noticed him first, and made an attempt to move away before the rest of the gang noticed. Dudley's plan failed.

"Hey Big D, look who else is here," Piers said, nodding toward Harry. Dudley turned and looked at Harry.

"Oh screw that," Dudley said. "I'm hungry man. Let's go get some fish and chips."

"Nah man. Let's beat him to a pulp. It'll only take a minute. We haven't had a good game of Harry Hunting in years!" Piers responded. Harry just held his books loosely by his side and smirked a little bit.

"I'd rather eat. I'm starving," Dudley said. He looked at Harry then. "Don't smirk at us like that, though, Freak. What are you doing at the park anyway? Creeping around and spying on children?"

"Some reading and letter writing, if you must know. Your snores are too loud for anyone in the house to focus. What are you doing at the park? Bullying small children to feel better about your new Grapefruit diet?"

"Shut up," Dudley said.

"Oh come on now. Grapefruit are delicious," Harry watched Dudley tense as he spoke. "Now if you'll excuse me. I'm off to mail this letter to my Godfather," he lied. Dudley looked like the personification of a popped balloon. His entire body seemed to deflate. Harry walked past them to leave. Piers made a move to lunge at him, but Dudley stopped him with a thick hand on his shoulder.

"Screw him man. We'll get him back somewhere less public," Dudley spoke. Harry laughed a little as he walked away. Both of them knew Dudley wouldn't attempt anything.

Harry wandered to the small library in the neighborhood and spent the rest of his afternoon there. It was pleasant. He looked up things on France, Italy and specifically, Florence, simply because he couldn't think of anything better to do. Of course, his version of 'looking up' consisted mostly of encyclopedia entries and staring at pictures of architecture. On the whole, though, it wasn't a bad day. Even if he spent way too much time in the library. He imagined telling Hermione that he spent at least four hours in a library on his birthday. She'd probably be too proud of him to question it.

When he got home he noticed a distinct absence of Dudley, which wasn't a bad thing. The kitchen table was set up for two and the smell of a large meal filled the room. He noticed candles and assumed that Dudley was dining out, and that no member of the Dursley family was actually serious about the diet.

No one stopped him as he went upstairs. That was fine by him. Petunia and Vernon probably assumed if they said anything he'd want to eat some of their food. And while it did smell good, he'd just eat some birthday cake for dinner. In his mind, that sounded much better.

The first thing he noticed was that Errol had taken the note and left and in the process managed to knock half of his belongings off the desk. He cleaned the mess up quickly before flopping down onto his bed and starting to channel surf. He settled a fighter pilot movie from a few years back. It wasn't particularly good, but at the very least it was entertaining. He grabbed a smuggled fork and some cake and ate while watching the movie. It wasn't his worst birthday, he thought.

When the movie ended he put the cake away and changed into his pajamas. He threw himself back onto his bed, intending to do more channel surfing. He landed practically on top of where he set his new books. As he shoved them off of his bed he noticed the Hogwarts crest on his manila envelope was glowing. He scrambled to grab it and nearly ripped the envelope as he opened it. He pulled out a piece of parchment and saw Fleur's pretty cursive handwriting inked wonderfully on it.

Dear Harry,

You're kidding me, right? You can't be serious. There is absolutely no way. I thought Lilly was pulling my leg when she told me. Quills? Quills? You still have to use quills? On everything? I mean, sure, we have to use anti-cheating quills on tests, but for any other work and note taking the professors don't particularly care as long as it's in ink. I can't even fathom why someone would want to use a quill.

I wish you the happiest of Birthdays. I am honored to be included in your birthday plans. Now don't eat too many of those chocolate frogs or you'll get sick!

To answer your questions. I'm actually writing to you from Florence right now. My Hogwarts friend, Lilly Sesion, invited me to stay at her family's estate for a week. I do mean estate too. It is almost sickening to see how much wealth her family has. I'm not even sure what her parents do. She and her mother both claim they are decedents of the De Medici family, but if that's true then I'm a descendent of Marie Antoinette.

That's sarcasm, too. I know it doesn't come across well in writing. I'd abhor being related to her.

Florence is a beautiful city. I love the architecture. I dragged Lilly to a bunch of museums today. She's not a fan, but I'm interested in the history and art so she puts up with it. After some coffee in a beautiful little café we wandered around the shops. The shopping in Florence is amazing, both Muggle and Magical. Lilly is interested in designer Muggle clothing so that's where we spent most of the evening.

I've been here for four days now. Lilly is a gracious host. We've gone to all sorts of monuments and architectural sites and looked at many different things. The De Medici family is amazing. I could bore you with the intimate details of everything we've seen, but I don't think I'll do that. Of course, if there is anything specific about Florence you would like to know, feel free to ask!

We have not ventured out to Pisa. I believe it's about an hour away by train. I would like to see the tower myself, but that probably isn't high up on Lilly's priority list. I have no idea how Muggles made a building stand like that. It certainly would be interesting to see.

You asked about my family. We live in Avignon in southern France. I have a younger sister, Gabrielle. She'll be turning eight soon. When I look at her it is like looking into a looking glass. I have to watch her often when my parents leave the house. We get along very well, despite the near nine year difference in our ages.

Gabrielle and I both take after my mother. She spends most of her time at home, taking care of Gabrielle and I. She misses me when I go away to school, I get a letter nearly every week.

My father is an avocat. I think the closest English word is solicitor? He takes both Muggle and Magical law cases. I think he wants to go into politics, eventually. But he has always loved law and is happy.

My interests don't stray far from my academic ideas. I like to read about charms. I do like art and architecture, though, as you can probably tell from my comments on Florence. I used to take ballet lessons when I was younger, but I haven't since I went away to school. I've thought about picking it up again, but I simply haven't had the time. Mother tried to get me to learn the piano when I was younger, too. But I didn't care for it at all. She's having better luck with Gabrielle.

Now, Harry, I am sorry about seeming too interested in who you might be. I was merely curious. My friend has told me a little bit about you. I know I probably shouldn't take second-hand information, and that having her inform me about you is probably slightly against the idea of learning about each other through our letters. But all she really said was that you're quiet and have a rather insular group of friends. She also told me that there are always rumors about you that tend to be unfounded and unexplained. I should also say that she is mostly indifferent about you. She knows very little and admits that freely. Of course, as far as she is concerned, the most important thing about you is preventing you from getting the snitch. She does say that you are an incredible seeker with a chance of going professional, if that is something you would be interested in.

She also told me of another student at your school, I assume he's one of the ones who hate you, and a rather classless prank he attempted during a match. I was more interested in how she said you summoned a Patronus Charm. You said before that Charms wasn't one of your favorite classes. Perhaps you should reconsider

that, Harry, because the patronus is an incredibly advanced, and challenging, charm and I'm very impressed.

I would like to say that, well, according to our Professors we were assigned to each other based on some system of testing they did, so I would like to give them the benefit of the doubt. I want to learn about the Harry Potter on the other side of the envelope, not the one in the contemporary history books.

Also, while it is very nice of you to attempt to learn French, you are right. Your first sentences there are abysmal. It took me a minute to figure out what you were trying to say. If you keep at it, you'll know what's wrong soon. If you like, I'll write up some basic French verb tables for you, but I bet they're in the back of your text.

Oh and I know very little about banking. I asked Lilly and she looked at me like I was insane. When I return to France I'll ask my father what exactly is expected of a bank and an account holder. I am sure there is some type of decorum involved.

I'm going to retire for the night now. Thank you for your second letter. Once again, bon anniversaire!

Bonne nuit,

Fleur.

Harry read the letter three times before he placed it on his bedside table. He wasn't sure if it was possible to establish an opinion about someone through two letters, but he liked this Fleur. She seemed like she would be a good friend.

Of course, she also seemed to be academically focused, and could likely just be being nice in order to get a good grade on her summer assignment. Of course, that's all he was doing, too. Still, he thought as he crawled into bed and resumed channel surfing, it was nice to have someone else to say things to. Even if they weren't colossally important things. And this Fleur seemed to accept that.

Eventually, he found a replay from the German Grand Prix at Hockenheim from earlier that day. He didn't really care about the race, but he liked the sound of the engines. The white noise helped him sleep. He wondered, as he rolled over and curled up into the

blankets, if it had anything to do with the motorcycle ride that eventually brought him to Privet Drive.

Author's Note: I was surprised at the reviews that mentioned a 'redemption' of Petunia. I used her mostly as a mouthpiece for things I noticed about the Wizarding world. And, I could imagine her secretly amused by Marge's fate, as Marge is insulting her sister. There will be no attempt at Dursley redemption, and they likely won't appear again in the rest of the story.

I also wrote the second to last chapter of this story the other night, so I've got it planned better at this point, which should increase update speed.

Next chapter should also polish off the 'assignment' portion of the fic. Likely it will take place after the World Cup, and there will be a bit more of Harry learning about Harry.

Thanks for the reviews. I appreciate all the feedback.

Chapter 4

Assignments Complete

Wormtail stepped up the old staircase very slowly. His master was meeting with another follower, he knew. But, it bothered him that he didn't know who the follower was. He stepped over Nagini as he approached the upstairs library where his master resided. The snake looked up at him, hungrily. Wormtail liked the snake about as much as he liked Padfoot. He grimaced at the comparison. Why did Black have to escape? He was fine as a pet of the Weasley's. Sure, they weren't his ideal family. But he could always sneak out for a couple of days and pass as a Muggle and no one was ever any wiser.

He stepped carefully over the snake and proceeded through the door into the upstairs library.

"Ah, Wormtail, how nice of you to finally join us," he heard a sickly voice speak. He'd been with his master for months, but the voice still sent chills down his spine.

"Yes master. I was merely -"

"No excuses, Wormtail. Neither of us care," his master coughed as he finished speaking. Wormtail rushed toward his side.

"Master, you should eat! Have you not had anything since lunch?" He asked. He cringed ever so slightly. He hoped it wasn't noticeable. The fetus-like shape that rested in the chair, garbed only in a pale blanket, was easily one of the most disgusting things Wormtail had ever seen. He choked back bile every time he looked at it.

"Of course I have not eaten, Wormtail," his master snapped. "I cannot feed myself, and you have not milked Nagini since then. But it can wait."

"Are you sure, Master?" Wormtail didn't relish the thought of feeding his master, but it was better to have it over with. He was, at the very least, less likely to get tortured that way.

"You presume to question me, Wormtail?" The fetus's hand twitched toward the wand that rested on the table.

"Of course not, Master!"

"Very good. Now, as you can see, you were not nearly as clever with our hiding spot as you imagined. Our friend here found us without much difficulty. Now, what would we have done had he been from the Ministry. Or worse, had he been Dumbledore?"

"I've been most discreet! There have been nothing more than vague rumors!" Wormtail argued.

"And it was vague rumors that led you to me in Albania. All it takes, Wormtail, is one curious person to follow the rumors. We've already had to kill one Muggle because of your indolence in checking the surrounding area. Let's not make ourselves anymore obvious."

"I'm sorry, Master!" Wormtail saw the hand twitch toward the wand again.

"You are very lucky, Wormtail, that I am not healthy right now. You will be more discreet. You will have no more trysts in the village. You will remain in the manor at all times." His master ordered.

"But you will need someone on the outside, too! Someone to retrieve things you need!"

"And I have that now. Don't you recognize our friend?" Wormtail looked over at the other figure. He was tall and blond and looked incredibly ragged. He didn't recognize him.

"No Master," Wormtail admitted. His master laughed, choking a little more as he did.

"That is probably for the best. You can't give him away, then. Regardless, he has come to me with a very interesting proposal. I believe we should hear him out."

"As you wish, my Lord."

"Continue, then," the fetus said. It made some sort of motion to the man standing by the fireplace, but Wormtail was still too busy examining the stranger to decipher the motion.

"Well, My Lord, as you know your plan for the World Cup worked. Crabbe and Goyle were easily conned into breaking out the old robes and tormenting some Muggles. I must admit Wormtail came through there. Chaos and panic ensued. Unfortunately, there were no deaths, Muggle or Wizard." The figure spoke. "I wish I could have aided your efforts better."

"That is alright. Panic and chaos will work just as well for now. The body count will come when I return."

"Yes. You may also be interested in knowing, My Lord, that the wand I stole to cast your mark was Harry Potter's. I didn't know it was him at the time. Please forgive me for not simply grabbing him and apparating away. Had I not been confused by the lingering effects of the curse, the ritual would already be complete!" The man kneeled before the chair that his master rested in.

"It is unfortunate, but understandable. After so long under the Imperius Curse side effects must be expected. Tell me, what happened to Potter's wand?"

"My father found him, and the wand, later. He attempted to accuse Potter of casting the mark. Amos Diggory convinced him to not. But as you said, sir, rumors can be useful." The man explained. Wormtail looked at him for a few moments and then gasped. Barty Crouch Jr? He had died in Azkaban! Well, apparently not.

"An interesting option," their master said. "But I don't know how well that rumor would spread right now. Maybe if we could get your father to back it. But I think I like your original plan even more. Explain it to Wormtail."

"My father had company over one night. They spoke of the Triwizard Tournament and how it will be taking place at Hogwarts this year."

"I fail to see how exactly that helps us. Besides, we discovered that in Albania" Wormtail spoke.

"That is because, once again, you lack any real creativity, Wormtail." Voldemort snapped. "Now continue."

"Igor Karkaroff is currently the headmaster at Durmstrang. Having him inside Hogwarts during the upcoming tournament may be of

incredible value. That is, if he is still loyal. He did hand over enough names for my father to pardon him. Of course, the scandal of my name emerging was a bit distracting," the younger Crouch laughed.

"It would be useful to have an agent inside Hogwarts. I cannot be sure if mine is currently active. For spending many years at the school, Wormtail provided surprisingly bad information." The Voldemort fetus tilted its head toward Wormtail briefly. He cringed away from both the look and the insult.

"Well, perhaps I should approach him before the school year, my lord?" Crouch asked.

"No. I doubt Karkaroff has remained loyal. He was very nearly as cowardly as Wormtail. We will dispose of him soon enough. Merely out of principle. Perhaps I shall let that fall to you. I doubt he will try to do anything more than flee," Voldemort spoke slowly, as if he contemplated his actions as the words came out.

"Thank you, My Lord. It would be an honor. Perhaps I should try to approach your old insider, then?" Crouch asked again.

"No." Voldemort answered quickly. When Crouch looked like he was about to question that decision, Voldemort continued. "I could lose too much if my former spy did turn his back on me. It will be best to gauge his loyalty later. He did nothing to bolster my confidence when I last infiltrated the castle. I fear he has been lost to me and our cause. For now, we must think of a way to place you in that position."

"Me sir?" Crouch asked. Wormtail thought he looked confused.

"Yes. You. Is there anything else we may be able to find useful. Your plan calls for someone inside of the castle. As my resources are limited to yourself and Wormtail, I'd have thought the decision rather obvious." Wormtail ignored the insult. By now he was mostly accustomed to them. He also realized that he wasn't sure what this plan was yet. He knew he'd likely be berated, but he asked anyway.

"You haven't explained the plan yet." Wormtail said.

"Oh. We enter Potter in the Triwizard tournament," Crouch said. Wormtail looked at him.

"How is that even possible?" Wormtail asked.

"If the tournament is held as it was in the past. The Goblet of Fire will determine the competitors. A powerful Confundus charm should be able to confuse it. If Potter's name is submitted under a non-existing school, he should still be required to compete," Crouch explained.

"Why would we want him competing?" Wormtail asked.

"Well, he'll likely die. Which would be unfortunate, but far from the worst possible outcome. But if we have an agent at the school that agent could attempt to earn Potter's trust. And from there help Potter though the tasks as secretly as possible," Crouch explained.

"But why would we want to help him?" Wormtail thought this plan sounded convoluted and dumb.

"Traditionally the last task involves retrieving the trophy. If the agent can turn the trophy into a Portkey, we can transport Potter to wherever we like. We can then use him to complete the resurrection ritual," Crouch explained. Wormtail felt the plan gained more merit. With how well Potter was protected it made sense. But still, he didn't think getting him into the tournament would be easy.

"But if he doesn't win?" Wormtail asked.

"Then the Dark Lord kills the Triwizard Champion. That will undoubtedly leave a collective scar on the psyche of the Wizarding world." Crouch shrugged. As if it was a win-win either way.

"I like this plan, Wormtail. We must think of a way to get an agent inside the school." Voldemort looked between his two disciples. The room was silent for a few moments before Crouch spoke again.

"I may have an idea there, Master. But it would be very challenging."

"Share it," Voldemort commanded. And Barty Crouch did just that.

The day after the World Cup was one of the most hectic Harry could remember. The Weasleys', particularly Molly, were being incredibly protective of him. And, while life at the Burrow was infinitely better

than life with the Dursleys, he would have at least liked to have the option of leaving. Of course he likely would not have minded this so much had he not wanted to check in with Gringotts, as well as maybe get some new Muggle clothing.

He couldn't be mad at Mrs. Weasley for doing his shopping for him, though. It was a nice gesture. He also doubted he could have picked out a pair of dress robes as nice as she had. He was restless, though. Ever since the idea planted itself in his head he just wanted to go out and do something for himself. He didn't think that Death Eaters were about to attack Diagon Alley, or Muggle London. And if they were watching him specifically, well, there were plenty of times that the house was defended by only Mrs. Weasley and a few children. And while Harry was completely confident in Mrs. Weasley's magical ability, he assumed a group of Death Eaters would have been capable of defeating her and some kids, if they so wanted to.

Of course, he thought idly, he didn't know what wards were on the house. Bill seemed to be a capable curse breaker. He was sure the Burrow was better defended than he knew.

But that didn't particularly matter to him. There hadn't even been the briefest mention of dark activity since the quidditch match. So in the few days following the World Cup he started to formulate a plan. It didn't take him long.

"Hey Hermione," he asked a few nights later. Hermione was finishing another letter to her pen pal. Harry couldn't help but admire how resolved she was. Her new friend did respond, occasionally, but it was always brief. Still, that didn't stop his friend from writing nearly constantly. At least, Harry thought, it kept her distracted from her new house elf crusade.

"Yes Harry?" she asked. He could tell she assumed that he was asking for help on a summer assignment. She hadn't believed him when he said he finished it all. Well, except for a little bit of Snape's essay that he didn't care about, and his final letter to Fleur. She didn't bother looking up at him.

"I was wondering if you could try to help me with something tomorrow morning?" Harry asked. He looked around the room once

more to make sure they were alone. Every Weasley was in bed. Ron had been the last to go, just a few minutes earlier.

"And what would that be?" Hermione asked as she took a moment to send the letter.

"I want to take a trip to Diagon Alley and then Muggle London to do some shopping. I could use your help," he explained. She raised an eyebrow at him.

"What do you need to buy?" she asked. He liked Hermione's directness. Ron would have probably groaned and said that such a trip simply sounded awful. Of course, he knew how Ron was with money, and he knew that watching him buy things, and explore a bank probably wouldn't end well. He just hoped he could think of a good enough excuse so that Ron didn't feel left out.

"Well I'd like to visit Gringotts. I want to learn more about what my parents left me. If anything. Really, I want to see what I have. I feel like I should know," Harry tried to explain why he felt that, but the words simply didn't come.

"I'm sure you could just ask Mr. or Mrs. Weasley, Harry," Hermione replied.

"Probably," Harry admitted. "But I want to do it myself."

"I highly doubt that they'll just let us go wandering around Diagon Alley, much less Muggle London. What did you need in London anyway?"

"Nothing special. I'd just like to do some shopping. I'm sick of wearing Dudley's old clothing." Harry admitted.

"That may be a good enough excuse," she said.

"It's not an excuse, Hermione, I really do want clothing that fits me."

"Oh I know. I was just saying that Mrs. Weasley probably won't have any interest in shopping in Muggle London, and Mr. Weasley has to work during the day so he probably won't be able to go. Ron and Ginny may want to join us, but if we catch Mr. Weasley early enough he may let us go alone."

"I was thinking the same thing," Harry said. "Especially if we mention the Muggle bit. Frankly, we're likely safer in Muggle London than just about anywhere else, too."

"Well it's worth a try at the very least. We should really invite Ron, though," said Hermione. Harry knew she was right, too.

"I'll ask in the morning. But you know how he can be with money," Harry admitted, thinking back to their second year and how Ron complained about his broken, second-hand wand.

"You do have a point there. He likes to sleep until noon, anyway."

"We can always tell him you wanted to go to a Muggle bookstore to pick up some French books," Harry teased. Hermione laughed a little bit.

"Yea that would scare him away. Speaking of which, how is your French coming?" She asked.

"Oh, erm, it's coming along," Harry lied. He hadn't really been working on it at all. Hermione saw straight through him.

"Oh Harry. Fine, repeat after me. Je suis. Tu es Il est," She started. Harry didn't let her finish the conjugation.

"I can conjugate 'to be,' Hermione," he interrupted. She looked at him for a moment.

"Prove it," she dared. Crossing her arms over her chest as she spoke.

"Je suis, tu es, il est, elle est, nous sommes, vous êtes, ils sont, elles sont," he replied quickly, getting the entire conjugation out in one breath.

"So you have been working on it! Good!" She smiled brightly at him. "Your pronunciation is a little off, but we'll work on that. Let's move onto harder things now. Quelle heure est-il?"

"Nuit?" Harry responded weakly.

"Well yes, but like what hour, you know, to drill numbers."

"I haven't gotten that far, Hermione. Let's work on that tomorrow." He begged. She sized him up for a moment.

"Fine. But only because you seem to want to get up early tomorrow. Mr. Weasley leaves around eight-thirty. So I'll expect you down here by then." She stood. He nodded and gathered up his stuff as well.

"I will be," he replied as they went to their separate rooms in the Burrow.

Upon entering Ron's room Harry immediately jammed his foot into the base of his friend's bed. Ron hadn't left the light on. Harry didn't blame him, he probably wouldn't have either. But still, stubbing his toe on his friend's bed was a bit annoying. Harry thought the orange walls would brighten the room more. Of course, when it was pitch black out, a little paint didn't brighten a room.

He stumbled to his bed. Ron's continued snores told him that he hadn't woken his friend. That was good. He quickly deposited his things in the corner he took over upon moving in. Ron hadn't seemed to mind. He made sure everything was accounted for before quickly changing into his pajamas.

As he changed he noticed a faint light coming from his pile of possessions. When he finished he went to check what exactly that was. He found his manila envelope and noticed that the Hogwarts crest was glowing. He felt bad, as he opened it, but didn't take out the letter yet. It had been nearly a month since he wrote to Fleur. He meant to after the World Cup, to tell her about it. He figured that would be an interesting letter. But with what happened he just hadn't gotten around to it.

Still, he was tired, and he'd likely wake Ron if he tried to read the letter now. So instead he crawled into bed and dozed off.

The sun woke him very early. He groped for his watch and discovered it was well over an hour before he and Hermione would attempt to ambush Mr. Weasley. He vaguely remembered wanting to do something in the morning. It took him a few moments of staring at the manila envelope to realize that the blurry crest was glowing. He took his glasses from the bedside table and pulled out the letter.

Fleur's handwriting looked less pristine than usual. Like perhaps she had rushed the letter.

Harry James Potter,

I looked up your middle name in a history text. Whenever mother is particularly angry with father, Gabrielle, or myself, she comes out with the full name. Fleur Isabelle Delacour sends me running for the hills. I hope I have the same effect on you as I am very very angry with you right now.

You do not reference that you are going to attend the World Cup in your first letter and then not send anything after Death Eaters start attacking at one of the camp sites. Of course, maybe you didn't get to go. In which case I apologize. Or maybe you were at a different camp site. In which case I apologize again. Of course, I am working on the assumption that you are perfectly fine, because I suspect that if anything had happened to you, it would be all over the papers.

I really do hope you are okay. It is probably silly of me to be concerned. But I have enjoyed your correspondence over the summer months, and would appreciate it if it were to continue. Really, I'm just worried that you may have been hurt. Please tell me you're okay.

Harry blinked at the first part of her letter. The thought that she would be worried about him was a little strange for Harry. It wasn't like she knew him, after all. Harry tried think of how he would feel if the situations were reversed. He would probably be disappointed if she had never sent the third letter. Would he be worried if no reply came? He had to admit that, well, yes.

Of course, it felt nice to have an older witch worried about him too. That alone made him feel a little special. And she wanted to continue their correspondence! Perhaps he'd send Hedwig with a letter to her after the semester began. It didn't matter if he didn't know her address, he was confident Hedwig could find her.

He reread the start of the letter once more. It was a little bit surprising, how he felt, well, cared for, by simply having her worry. Three years, two close friends, and a surrogate family and he still wasn't accustomed to the feeling.

He went back to reading the letter. He guessed Fleur had paused at that point as well, as the writing became significantly neater for the remainder of the letter.

I digress though. I know I did a disservice on your question about banking from our previous letters. When I returned home to Avignon I asked my father about how the banking system worked. He gave me a rather thorough synopsis of the French banks. After that I asked if English banks were different. He explained that they are a little different and explained the differences.

At that point I decided to attempt to end the conversation. But instead I was treated to another lecture on German banking systems. From there, I received a comparison of all three. And now, my father seems to be under the impression that I am simply fascinated by banking and that I should attempt to get an internship or job at a bank once I have graduated from Beauxbatons.

The differences are actually fairly interesting. Goblins and humans do have different ways of running things. That's not to say that the French banks are without goblin involvement. Father said that most of them fled after the wars. The vast majority took up residence in the United Kingdom, although a large chunk also went overseas to both Americas.

Because of this, after the Second World War wizarding France was rather depleted. I think it was largely the same in Britain and Germany as well, but my French history is considerably better. A group of Muggle-borns helped the depleted work force at the Paris Gringotts branch. Eventually, the goblins gave them more and more control over the bank. Now, most of the Gringotts branches in France are run by humans, but overseen by goblins. Again, this is largely because of the lack of a goblin population in France.

Because of the influence of Muggle-borns, many Muggle banking practices were adopted. Most of the differences in banking styles between England and France come from goblin and human practices. In general, though, all Gringotts branches run pretty much the same way.

However, my father did state that a statement is pretty universal. Most of the differences come when more complicated systems arise, like investing. Father says goblins are typically more conservative

investors than humans. But angry wizards blaming them for losing their money is the last thing they need, so I guess that's understandable.

He said there were many reasons someone wouldn't receive a statement, especially if that person is a minor. There could have been a clause in a will, or some type of age restriction, or they could be redirected to a guardian. In most cases, you would still have access to the vaults and the full contents therein unless something explicitly says you do not. He advised talking to a banker as he felt that in the case of any of these, you would have the right to know just why you were not receiving a statement, or any fiscal information.

Coincidentally, a very similar thing happened with Beauxbatons. The magical population was so hindered after the wars some Beauxbatons classes were in the single digits. It was then that the headmaster at the time hired squibs with degrees in certain subjects and taught a lot of magical theory and non-magical classes. The headmaster felt that another war would soon brake out, and that magical society may be decimated. He was wrong, of course, but a lot of the heavy theory and other classes at Beauxbatons are still around because of this.

I'm sorry I can't provide more help than that. But banking is actually really confusing. There's apparently far more to it than putting your money in a secure spot. I wish you luck in your endeavors. Hopefully you've already figured this all out and my answer is too late.

The rest of my trip in Florence was fairly uneventful. Lilly took me to a great deal of shops, and I dragged her to far too many museums for her liking. We both had a splendid time. She told me to pass on that 'Ravenclaw is going to kill you this year' which seemed rather childish to me, but she believes taunts are half the fun of sports.

On a side note, you may be able to counter the aforementioned taunts with a comment that her new boyfriend is old enough to be her father. He isn't. But he is five, maybe even six, years older than her. I'm sure it will not end pleasantly for Lilly, but it is her choice.

I'm back in Avignon now. I'm going to spend the last few days of summer going over my final summer homework assignments. The work load seems surprisingly light this year. Perhaps they're just

waiting to crush us with the impending exams. I expect I'll be distracted from studying by Gabrielle on countless occasions, anyway. Part of me thinks it would be fun to still be in school when she starts. Part of me is very glad I will not be. I'm shopping for my school supplies tomorrow. That will likely be the highlight of the remainder of my summer.

I must say I am rather glad you were my pen pal. I may have only received two letters to this point, but this assignment has been fun. It truly was a pleasure to exchange letters with you this summer. I hope you enjoyed it as well. If you ever find yourself in France, specifically southern France, let me know. I also hope you don't mind if I look for you should I ever be in England.

Now write back as soon as you can to tell me that I'm overreacting. That a few stray renegade fools who decided to masquerade as Death Eaters are no match for Harry Potter, and that I'm foolish to even think you could have been harmed!

Adieu

Fleur Isabelle Delacour

Harry was smiling by the end of the letter. He couldn't help it. He thought idly about traipsing over the channel and exploring France. He wondered if Sirius had every spent some time there.

He imagined his Godfather chilling on a beach, freshly groomed, and ogling young witches as he sipped a drink. He knew that was probably better than whatever Sirius was currently doing. He silently wished Sirius the best, hoping that perhaps Sirius was somewhere where he could be himself.

Harry reread the letter once more, focusing a little bit more on the details involved in the banking aspects of it. He was glad to know that he wasn't the only one who was naive to certain business practices in the magical world. He made a mental note to thank her in his final letter because he at least had some vague idea what could be going on now. Even if the vague idea wasn't a particularly good one. And, she had tried to help him simply based on him whining in a letter.

He realized he was going to be late for his meeting with Hermione if he didn't get out of bed. He placed the letter under the cover of one of his books and ran off to the Weasley bathroom to shower and get ready for the day.

Before he ran downstairs to meet with Hermione, though, he decided to attempt to wake Ron.

"Hey Ron, Hermione and I are going to try to go to Muggle London to pick up some things, get out of the house, you know. Wanna come?" He asked over the light snoring.

"Ugh. Just a few more minutes," Ron said, rolling over in the bed

"So you'll come with us?" Harry was slightly surprised. Ron pulled the blankets over his head and curled into a ball.

"Few...more....minutes," he said, his voice droning off. Harry shook his head. He figured he should have known better than trying to wake Ron up at this absurdly early hour. So instead he scribbled a quick note saying that He and Hermione were going to try to go to a Muggle bookstore to pick up some things she was looking into. That he'd tried to wake him, and that he expected to be back by lunch.

Harry found Hermione waiting for him downstairs. She was eating breakfast quietly. Molly Weasley piled a large amount of food onto a plate and handed it to Harry as he entered. Harry sat at the table, between Hermione and Mr. Weasley, He ate slowly as he realized he wasn't sure how to convince Mr. Weasley to let them out. He knew Mrs. Weasley wouldn't allow it, so it would be futile to ask with her in the room.

Thankfully, as if on cue, Molly excused herself, saying she had to go wake Ginny. It was then that Hermione took action.

"Mr. Weasley?" she asked quietly.

"Yes?" He responded, not even bothering to look up from the paper.

"Well, I was wondering if I could head out to a Muggle bookstore in London today. One of my favorite authors has a new book out, and I would just love to pick it up," she asked sweetly. Mr. Weasley looked at her.

"Why don't you tell Molly the title and she can go pick it up for you. I don't think it's safe to go out alone," he said and went back to reading the paper.

"Well it's a Muggle book, and I'd like to browse a bit too. Harry will go with me. We'll be fine, perfectly safe," she said. Harry thought she sounded very convincing.

"Yea, I'd go," he interjected.

"I don't know. Molly wouldn't approve. It's not safe out there. You never know when Death Eaters could strike again," he said. "But now I must go to work. You two have fun today." He stood and walked outside where he apparated to the ministry.

"Well that didn't work," a voice said from the door. Both Harry and Hermione jumped as Bill Weasley walked into the kitchen and started to gather up some breakfast.

"No, it certainly didn't," Hermione said. Bill leaned against the counter and ate the toast.

"You really just want to head to a bookstore and pick up some Muggle books?" he asked.

"She does," Harry responded, not knowing if that was really true, or if she just figured it was a convenient story. "And I was hoping to be able to pick up some new clothing."

"Interesting," Bill said, appraising them for a moment.

"Yes. It's silly we're stuck here. Not that we really mind, the Burrow is great, but we'll be perfectly safe. It's not like there's Death Eaters walking around Muggle London. There hasn't even been any more dark activity since the World Cup!" Hermione complained.

"And it's not like we don't know how to blend in," Harry added. He watched Bill finish his toast. The oldest son of Arthur and Molly seemed lost in thought.

"Alright," he said after a minute. "I'll take you to the Alley, I'm sure you can find whatever you need in the general vicinity, then you can just use the floo at the Leaky Cauldron to get back."

"Really?" Harry was stunned.

"Yea. A little bit of adventure is always fun. And the two of you are likely going to be perfectly safe in most areas of London." Bill finished his toast before lifting himself off of the counter. "And frankly, mum's a bit overprotective. It certainly isn't a war out there. Everything is pretty much normal. But you should still be careful."

"Thank you, Bill," Hermione said.

"Yea, thanks," Harry added.

"Just do me a favor," Bill said.

"What's that?" Hermione asked as she too finished her breakfast.

"Don't wind up getting yourself killed in London. Mum would never let me live it down," Bill joked. Harry couldn't help but chuckle a little bit.

"We'll do our best, Bill," Harry responded.

"Alright then. Let's go outside and I'll side-along you one at a time to the Leaky Cauldron. I'm sure you can figure out wherever you'd like to go from there?"

"Yes, we'll be fine," Hermione said. Harry was glad she thought so, he wasn't sure could navigate from where.

"Alright. Meet me out front then. I'm just going to scribble a note to mom so she'll blame me and not the two of you," he said as he grabbed a quill and some parchment. Harry and Hermione nodded and walked out to the front of the Burrow.

A few moments later Harry found himself slightly dizzy and rather nauseous. Apparation was a lot stranger than he expected. Bill had left to head to the bank immediately after popping in with Harry. Hermione had gone first and looked recovered. Harry vaguely heard her speak.

"Give it a few seconds and your head will feel like it comes out of the tube," she said, moving close to him. He nodded. Sure enough, like always, she was right. A few seconds later he felt mostly himself.

"That was strange," he said slowly as the world righted itself around him.

"Yes. I'd read about it, but it was certainly strange," Hermione admitted. Harry took another moment to ready himself before asking.

"So do you really know where we should go?"

"Well yea, unless you have a surplus of Muggle money on you, Harry, we have to go to the bank first," she said matter-of-factly.

"Oh that's right," Harry said quietly. He had hoped that the bank could be the last step of their trip. Of course, he now realized how silly that was. Hermione led him into the alley and toward the bank.

It was still early enough that Gringotts was not crowded. Harry realized he hadn't really utilized the bank himself since his first year with Hagrid. He had his key, he'd found it in his trunk the night before, which was good. Harry paused in the entryway of the bank. He was only vaguely aware that Hermione pulled him toward the waiting line. Three goblin tellers were open and Hermione dragged him up to the closest one. He placed his key on the counter. The goblin spoke.

"You wish to visit your vault?" It spoke with a faux cheerfulness. Harry idly wondered if that was simply a trait of bank tellers worldwide.

"Well, yes. But I'd also like to, uhm, you know, learn what all is in it, and what all my parents left me. Like, did they have a will?" Harry asked, sounding mostly confused. The goblin looked at him. His eyes found Harry's scar and his face fell for a moment as he realized that a simple vault trip had turned into something more complicated.

"Do you have an appointment?" The goblin asked, despite knowing the answer. If Harry had an appointment he would not have gone into the teller's line.

"Uhm. No," Harry admitted.

"Very well. Wait over there," the goblin said and pointed toward a corner where a few chairs sat outside what appeared to be some offices. The goblin picked up the key too, examined it and handed it back to Harry. "Gornuk will be with you in a few minutes, Mr. Potter." Harry nodded a little bit. He wondered how the Goblin knew his name, but then remembered the scar, and assumed that the goblin confirmed it with something on the key.

"I wonder how long we'll have to wait," Harry asked as he and Hermione took a seat.

"I have no idea," Hermione said with a shrug. "At least the chairs are comfortable."

After ten minutes of idle chat that centered around whether or not the new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor would be competent one of the office doors opened. Another goblin walked out and looked at the two young wizards.

"Mr. Potter?" It asked. Harry nodded and stood.

"Yes?"

"Come with me," he said and walked back into the office. Harry and Hermione stood and walked into the office. The goblin continued to speak as he sat behind a large desk. "I am Gornuk. Now how can I be of service? Oh, and please sit." Harry and Hermione both did. Harry took a moment to look around the office. It reminded him a bit of Dumbledore's office, mostly because of the amount of unidentifiable things littering the desk.

"I uhm, was wondering if I could see my parent's will?" Harry asked. He wasn't really sure if that was what he was supposed to say.

"Very well. You will need to present two types of identification before we proceed with that," Gornuk said. Then, upon seeing the confused and worried look on Harry's face he added, "Your wand and vault key will suffice."

"Oh, okay," Harry said and took out both, placing them on the desk in front of Gornuk. The goblin picked up each item and examined them carefully with some of the devices on the desk. After a moment he looked satisfied.

"Alright, Mr. Potter, will a copy of your parents will conclude your business with us?" Gornuk asked as he handed back the items.

"Uhm. No, I'd like to have some galleons exchanged for Muggle money."

"That can be arranged. Or, if you prefer, we can issue you something we often issue to mix-marriages or people who want to spend time in Muggle locations. We call them Gringotts cards. They're essentially a plastic card that links to your vault. They act like a Muggle credit card, if you are familiar with those," Gornuk explained. "They're becoming very popular in some other magical communities. Most wizarding shops do not accept it, but it is useful for wizards who spend time amongst Muggles. Still being tested, here, but Gringotts would appreciate your testing one."

"That would actually be very handy," Harry admitted, even though he wasn't sure how often he would use it. Gornuk nodded and took out a form and a quill, placing each on the desk in front of Harry.

"Fill that out then, Mr. Potter. I will return with your first request." The goblin stood and left the office, leaving Harry and Hermione to look over the paperwork. The form was pretty straight forward. Hermione helped him with the few questions he couldn't answer himself. Harry signed it as Gornuk entered the room again. The goblin moved back to the desk and put a folder down in front of Harry.

"Inside that, Mr. Potter, is a copy of James and Lily Potter's will, as well as a summary of the contents of your family vault. I'll let you look it over here at your leisure. However, that copy is Gringott's only one, if you would like a copy yourself you'll have to file for it. That one should not leave my office," Gornuk explained.

"Alright. Thank you, sir," Harry said quietly, staring at the folder.

"You're welcome, Mr. Potter," Gornuk responded. He glanced over the form Harry had just filled out. It appeared to be to his liking, he picked it up. "I will take care of this while you look over the will." The

goblin left again. Harry stared at the folder containing the will for a few moments before he finally worked up the courage to open it.

It was surprisingly short. The handwriting looked too neat to belong to a male, so Harry assumed that Lily had composed it. Of course, he had no idea what either of their handwriting looked like, so he supposed that may be a biased call. Harry learned that just about every asset the Potter's had was left directly to him, in the event of his survival. There were some other minor things left to other people, like some gold to each of the Marauders, as well as some other items left to people Harry didn't know. Even the Dursley's received some money, although it was considerably less than anyone else.

He looked over the assets briefly, not really sure what most of the material items were. It was stated their wardrobes should be donated, which Harry thought was a nice gesture.

Eventually, Harry found what he was looking for. He read that his first legal guardian was to be Sirius Black. He knew that already. If Mr. Black was incapable of holding that position, his guardian ship, it stated, would pass to Albus Dumbledore, with the intention of fulfilling the emergency charms for his safety. Harry saw that this was explained further. It stated he would have to live with the Dursley's until he would attend Hogwarts. It also stated that the guardian would be responsible for fiscal decisions until Harry turned seventeen. Harry noted an edit, made by Dumbledore, dated shortly before his eleventh birthday which stated that Dumbledore allowed Harry to have free access to the vault. And that was the end of the mention of Harry. A few more items were dispersed. He read it once more to simply make sure he had everything down.

"That's pretty straight forward," he said, passing it to Hermione, even though he knew she'd been reading it over his shoulder. He noticed other paperwork in the folder and started to look over that. The first was a record of all of the items in the will being discharged. Money had been deposited from the Potter vault into the respective vaults, and items had been claimed.

The second piece of paper was more interesting to him. It contained the contents of the Potter vault, as well as record of every withdrawal and deposit since their death. The first thing he noticed was two large deposits days after his parent's deaths. Then, for the decade following, there were a few small withdrawals and deposits,

signed for by Albus Dumbledore. At first Harry was annoyed with that. Why was Dumbledore using his money? But then he noticed that every withdrawal was followed, a few days later, with a deposit for the exact same amount of money. He'd have to question the Headmaster about that, if he ever got the chance.

He noticed the number at the bottom of the sheet. It was large, but he knew it was less than half of what Gwenog Jones made in a year with her new contract. Judging from his average school expenses, too, he figured he would have to get a job at some point.

He noticed Hermione was looking at the same sheet he was now, too. He pointed to the top two deposits, the largest two on the sheet.

"What do you suppose those were?" He asked.

"I don't know," she looked at them carefully. "Life insurance policy maybe? It's dated right after their deaths."

"Oh. That would make sense. I suppose I'd take out a policy if I knew Voldemort was after me too," Harry said. He realized then, that, well, Voldemort was after him. He idly wondered if he should write his own will.

Gornuk picked that moment to return. He handed a small black card to Harry. Harry turned it over in his hands. It looked like an exact replica of Muggle credit card.

"You must sign the back for it to activate. If you're ever prompted for your 'Personal Identification Number' it is your vault number with a zero in front since it requires four digits."

"Thanks," Harry said, picking up the quill he had used to fill out the paperwork earlier and signing the back. The card glowed for a moment as it magically activated. "But shouldn't Dumbledore have to approve things I do in the vault, with him being the guardian?"

"No. He granted you free access to the vault. Adding the card is just an extension to that. As far as Gringotts is concerned you are free to spend the Potter money in any way you like. He will receive bank statements and financial updates, as well as investment tips until you turn seventeen. At that point we would highly encourage you to come in and speak with a banker about the future of your vault in

more detail. However, until that point we cannot change anything without the express consent of your Guardian," Gornuk explained.

"I see. Thank you for all of your help," Harry said.

"You're welcome Mr. Potter. Thank you for your patronage of Gringotts Wizard Bank," Gornuk said formally. "Are you finished with these documents?"

"Yes. Thank you. I think we'll be going," Harry said. The Goblin nodded and gathered up the Potter's will. After they left the office Harry turned to Hermione and spoke.

"Well, shopping then?" He asked his best friend.

"Sure," she smiled at him. "I'm totally jealous of that card, by the way. You may want to keep it under wraps around Ron."

"You're probably right," Harry admitted. He paused for a moment, "Well, bookstore first, or clothing?" He watched his friends eyes light up and she laughed.

"Bookstore of course!"

Harry and Hermione enjoyed their afternoon. Harry thought they spent a little too long in the bookstore, but he could hardly complain as she helped him pick out nearly an entire wardrobe later. Her taste was certainly much better than his. He wasn't even annoyed she'd made him repeat the prices to everything in French. He didn't buy anything particularly special though, just things he could be comfortable lazing around in on weekends.

The pair walked back to the Leaky Cauldron and took the Floo back to the Burrow. Harry fell out of the fire, but was happy that he managed to keep the bags from spilling everywhere.

"Hello Harry," Mrs. Weasley said as Hermione came out through the fire. Harry winced a little bit and looked up at her. She was still smiling. She picked up the bags, "Why don't you let me take those up to Ron's room. I see Bill was right. You were perfectly safe." Her voice could best be described as stiff.

"Yes. Sorry Mrs. Weasley, Hermione and I just had some errands we wanted to do. Didn't want to impose more," Harry admitted.

"Oh it's fine. I just do wish you'd discuss it with me next time," Molly said sternly. Harry got a feeling Bill would get much worse chewing out.

"We will. Where's Ron?"

"Out back flying around with Ginny and the twins," Molly said. "They asked for you to join them when you got back. Something about playing a three on three game."

"Awesome," Harry said, and heard an audible groan from Hermione as she realized she'd just been conscripted.

It wasn't until later that evening, after Hermione had made him drill French once more, that Harry found himself finally composing his final letter to Fleur.

Fleur Isabelle Delacour,

You are overreacting. Although I do appreciate the concern, a few stray renegade fools who decide to dress up at Death Eaters are not going to be able to stop Harry Potter, no matter how hard they try. Of course, I personally wish they'd stop trying.

Although, and I'm not sure I'm supposed to talk about it or not, but we did run across them at our camp sight. There isn't much to say, really. They were using a spell to float some Muggles around and generally just blowing up anything they could get near. We ran and hid in the forest. It's probably not my bravest moment, but none of us really knew what to do.

The rest of the night got a little confusing. We actually ran into some girls from Beauxbatons in the woods. I wasn't thinking enough to ask after you, well that and the fact that we were in a panic. I should have attempted to wow them with my mastery of the French language! I'd lost my wand somewhere along the way (I've since found it). Eventually, we ran into some ministry officials and everything ended up being okay. Stories like that always sound better in your mind, don't they? More heroic and glamorous?

Nothing says epic adventure like running scared to death through the woods!

But the important thing is that we are all okay. I just hope they catch whoever did it soon.

Also, you have a pretty name.

I'm glad you enjoyed your trip to Florence and it sounds like the rest of your summer is going to be pleasant. I'll confess that, while I did look up Florence after you mentioned it, I have no idea where Avignon is. I'd ask Hermione, but she'd probably lecture me on the history of France for an hour. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

I'd be honored if you were to look me up if you're ever in England. I would love to do the same. Maybe I'll have the means to travel next summer.

The rest of my vacation has been pretty enjoyable as well. The World Cup was fun. Viktor Krum is amazing to watch. Part of me wishes I could be that good some day. It would really be a thrill to hear an announcer yell my name in front of thousands of screaming fans.

Today was a particularly good day. Hermione and I went to the bank. I managed to read my parents will and find out what has happened to all their assets. I must thank you for your information on the banks. It did help. All I really needed to do was go into the bank and ask. Who would have thought something that simple would have been effective? The goblins were very courteous, too.

After that we did some Muggle shopping. Hermione wanted to pick up some new books, so we spent far too long in a bookstore. After that she helped me pick out a bunch of new clothes. It feels nice to have all sorts of new things to wear, even though I've never really been that concerned with clothing. Hermione really was great, though. She helped me pick out a ton of stuff that I'm not sure if I'd have even looked at, and seemed entertained by the entire trip.

When we got back home Ron and the rest of his siblings who were home were flying around out back, so we played some three on three. I was rather surprised at the outcome. Ron played with his

brothers, Fred and George, both of whom are on the house team with me. I played with Hermione, who hates being on brooms, and Ginny, Ron's younger sister. We torched them. Hermione just floated near our hoop and Ginny and I tore them apart. She's getting very good. I'm indifferent on chasing, but there was no need for a seeker. Fred and George just couldn't match me and Ginny. I'm not sure she'll ever let them live down getting out-flown by their younger sister.

But now I'm packing my new clothes and getting ready to take the train back to school in a few days. Well, if by packing my clothes I mean staring at them every couple of minutes while I compose a letter to a certain French witch. Maybe if I stare hard enough I'll have an uncontrollable magic burst and they'll wind up packed? If only magic was that convenient.

I would be honored, Fleur, if you wished to continue to correspond with me outside of the parameters of the assignment. I feel like I have gained a friend through this assignment. I'm sorry my third letter kept you waiting for so long. My only excuse is that the last few weeks got away from me.

I have a very talented owl, Hedwig, who has yet to have any issue finding someone I'd like to write to, even without much more clue than their name. Once I'm settled at school, I'll write to you (about what, I've no idea) and hopefully we can continue to do this. I look forward to your letters, and am happy to know that mine haven't bored you to tears. This has really been fun.

Sincerely Yours,

Harry James Potter.

Harry reread the letter once before he slid it into his manila envelope and sent it on its way. He couldn't help but wonder if the folders would still work after the assignment was complete. He didn't think of that for long though, as he knew he should really get his new clothing packed. So he tossed the folder onto the desk and proceeded to do just that.

He couldn't help it if his thoughts wandered to an older French witch worrying about him. After all, what young wizard didn't want that?

Author's Note: This chapter got away from me a bit. The first copy was 13,000 words, where 6000 is my goal. So I spent some time cutting out a fair amount.

Sadly, Nagini did not eat Wormtail, despite how funny that idea is. I also realized I deviated a bit from Crouch's story in the book, but if he isn't hit by a random stunning spell at the World Cup, then there's a solid chance it could have happened that way.

As always, thanks for all the reviews, I appreciate them. Hope you all had a happy holidays.

Chapter 5

The Tournament

Barty Crouch Jr. stood outside the dark house in the middle of an equally dark neighborhood. Leave it to 'Mad-Eye' Moody to live right smack in the middle of a Muggle neighborhood. Luckily for he and Wormtail the sun was yet to rise. It had taken them longer to locate the proper house than they had planned. It didn't help that Moody had relocated at least three times in the last three months. No wonder people thought he was mad.

Barty knew, as he stood under his invisibility cloak, that this would be their last chance. They were lucky that Moody had not moved to Hogwarts yet.

"We should make our move," Wormtail said from his side. Wormtail's part of the plan was simply to be the decoy. They hoped that Moody would not recognize him. He was, afterall, supposed to be dead. And, if Moody did recognize Wormtail and the plan failed, then hopefully Barty would not have to reveal himself, and no one would learn of his escape from Azkaban.

"Soon," Crouch replied. He cast a quick spell to survey the wards on the area. Not much appeared, making it appear safe enough. But both Death Eaters knew Mad-Eye better than that. The plan pretty much consisted of sending Wormtail in as bait, and when the Auror was distracted, having Crouch stun him. The biggest issue would be how to place Crouch so Moody's magical eye would not spot him under the cloak.

"You should probably move up through the wards with me," Wormtail said. "That way if anything activates, hopefully Moody will only see me and you can pin yourself against the house there, next to the door?" he gestured to the spot. While Barty didn't particularly like the thought of following a plan Wormtail had originated, he was yet to think of a better idea.

"That should work. I doubt he has anything too dangerous active, given the neighborhood, but it is Moody," Crouch said. Wormtail nodded.

"He may already know we're here," Wormtail added.

"Yes. But I doubt he extended the wards past the yard. I'm not even sure Moody is insane enough to tolerate them going off every time someone walks past the house," Crouch commented.

"You're probably right. Well. Enough stalling, the sun is coming up. Let's go?" Wormtail asked, clearly afraid to take the initiative.

"Lead on, Wormtail." The shorter man nodded and took a step forward.

Wormtail immediately felt the wards on the home sense him. They didn't seem to be anything more than basic intruder wards, which was all they had been able to detect. Wormtail kept walking toward the door. He felt Crouch push past his left side and knew the cloaked Death Eater was going to hide up against the wall of the house. Wormtail kept his steady pace as he walked right up the path to the front door. Nothing else triggered in the yard. He took a deep breath when he reached the front door.

He felt Crouch shield him as he pressed the doorbell. Strangely, nothing happened. Well, nothing out of the ordinary at least. They heard the bell ring. Nothing happened or a few seconds after that. Wormtail stared at the door, standing enough to the side so Barty should have a clear shot with his curse when Moody opened it. They waited a few moments longer before Wormtail felt something creeping up on him. He turned to see two garbage cans had been animated and spewing garbage everywhere as they made to attack. The flying garbage was scorching the ground where it landed.

Wormtail went to raise his wand when a red blast of light hit the first can. It knocked it back, but didn't cancel the enchantment. Another blast of red light hit the second one. Wormtail watched the two cans continue to approach and tried the most basic spell that came into mind.

"Finite!" he said sharply, pointing his wand at the closer of the two. It fell sideways and stopped spewing garbage. A quick flick of his wand canceled the second one as well. He turned back to the door, not sure what to do when another blast of red light took the door off its hinges.

"Go, Wormtail, find him. I'll cover you," Barty hissed. Wormtail nodded and stepped into the house. It was dark and appeared to be empty. He kept walking, carefully through the rooms, knowing Barty wouldn't step into the same room as him, just to avoid detection from Mad-Eye.

The living room appeared to be empty. As did the kitchen. He stepped carefully into the den and still saw no sign of Moody. It worried him that there was no sign of any living creature. It also worried him that he didn't know where Crouch was. He determined that Moody was not on the first floor. He paused at the bottom of the stairs and waited for a few seconds, just so Crouch would understand what his next move was.

Wormtail ascended the stairs slowly. He looked around carefully. The upstairs consisted of a long hallway and a few rooms coming off of it. To his right appeared to be the master bedroom. To his left was a bathroom and what appeared to be two more bedrooms further down the hallway. The bathroom door was open, and Wormtail peered into it to discover it empty. He backtracked toward the master bedroom and carefully opened the door.

It also appeared to be empty. Wormtail walked around the large bed that dominated the room. It was messy. Someone had been there, at least. There were also pictures and other possessions on the dresser in the corner. Wormtail turned to exit the room when he finally saw their target.

Alastor Moody was standing, hidden by the doorway, and watching Wormtail carefully.

"Pater Pettigrew?" He asked, sounding shocked. His wand was leveled toward the Death Eater. "And here I assumed that you were just some Muggle thief."

"Sadly, no," Pettigrew said, shifting into a practiced dueler's stance. He knew he wouldn't last very long in a straight up fight against Alastor Moody, but it should be a straight up fight.

"Do you really think you can out duel me, Pettigrew?" Moody asked with a laugh. Pettigrew shifted so Moody would have to put his back to the door.

"For the sake of my Master, yes," Pettigrew taunted.

"So you really are working for He-who-must-not-be-named. I thought Dumbledore was losing it when he mentioned that this summer."

"No. But I did have him fooled for years. All the while residing in the home of one of his greatest allies. Things I've learned have, and will continue to, help the Dark Lord greatly!" Wormtail said proudly.

"You're assuming I let you go," Moody laughed. "Instead, I'll lock you in that trunk you're standing in front of and take you to Dumbledore today."

"What?" Wormtail stammered as he looked over his shoulder at the large trunk with many locks. It was all the distraction the former Auror needed.

"Stupefy!" Mad-Eye shouted, sending a jolt of red energy right at Peter Pettigrew. Wormtail would have sworn he heard an echo as the room went black.

He groggily opened his eyes to see Barty crouch staring down at him.

"Good, you're awake. Help me get him into this trunk," Crouch ordered. Wormtail saw the stunned and bound Moody standing by the door.

"So the plan worked?" He asked groggily as he stood up and moved toward Moody's body. He levitated it lazily toward the trunk.

"Yes. Sorry I couldn't get him until he had already stunned you," Crouch said. Wormtail doubted that was the truth.

"It's fine. We got it. I expect someone from the ministry to be here soon. Those attacking cans made a lot of noise." Almost on cue they heard what must have been Moody's intruder ward activate.

"Shit," Crouch said. "You have the potion?" He asked as he ripped a few hairs off the unconscious Moody's head.

"Yes, here." Wormtail pulled a vial out of Polyjuice and tossed it to Crouch, who caught it in mid air. The other Death Eater quickly put

the hairs into it and gulped it down. Wormtail took the time to magic Moody's eye out of the socket and onto the dresser in the room. He put the leg next to it, too. After that he deposited Moody into the trunk and turned to look at the new Moody. He watched Crouch put the eye in, wincing with disgust.

"This thing is disgusting," Crouch said.

"I'd imagine." Wormtail watched it spin around and look at everything. "I always wondered how that thing worked."

"It cuts into my vision. It's almost like seeing double, but it's still like I'm looking straight at whatever it sees." As Crouch finished speaking the eye darted across the room. He nearly fell over as his vision adjusted. "And it's certainly going to take some getting used to. There has to be a way to control it. Oh well, at least I know it's Arthur Weasley who was sent to investigate the disturbance. Hide under the cloak, I left it on the bed. Once I get rid of him, we can figure out what we need to take to the school."

Wormtail obliged, picking the cloak off the bed as Crouch affixed the fake leg and started to move, very carefully, down the stairs. He couldn't help but smile. The first step of their master's plan worked flawlessly.

Harry Potter tossed himself into the seat on the Hogwarts Express. It was the first chance he'd had to relax that day. Heading back to Hogwarts was always a hectic day. He looked forward to the few hours of the train ride before the feast. He saw Ron digging through his bag, probably to attempt to finish his potions essay. Harry had finished his, rather poorly, the previous evening.

"You told me you finished that!" Hermione scolded as Ron dug for a quill.

"Yea, well, I haven't. Got most of it done. Just need a conclusion," Ron said, sucking gently on the end of the quill as he reread his last paragraph. "You'll look it over for me when I'm done, right?"

"Well," Hermione scoffed. "Only if you finish it quickly." She did her best to sound annoyed, but both boys knew that she liked to be right too much to avoid a chance to correct either of them.

Harry stretched out on the seat and yawned. The scenery was just changing from London to the countryside. He stared out the window for a few minutes, zoning out. He saw Hermione rifle through her belongings out of the corner of his eye, but didn't pay much attention to whatever she was looking for. At least until she spoke.

"Oh! It looks like we got our grades on our letter assignment!" she exclaimed, pulling out a stiff looking piece of parchment from hers.

"Don't care, potions," Ron said, scribbling furiously at the bottom of his essay.

"Harry cares though, right Harry?" Hermione asked.

"Uhm. Yea," Harry replied. He didn't really care, but it would make Hermione less likely to question him about it. He pulled his trunk down and started to dig through it for his manila envelope. Sure enough, the crest on it was glowing and he pulled out an equally stiff and formal looking piece of parchment. It was brief.

Mr. Potter,

You have done an exceptional job with this assignment. You and your pen pal appear to have embraced the assignment and started the foundations for a lasting relationship. Hopefully, you and Miss Delacour can continue the relationship that has been fostered.

I also noticed that writing has appeared to be therapeutic. Perhaps it is something you should continue with.

Your grade for the assignment: O.

Professor McGonagall

Harry simply read 'exceptional' and 'O' before tossing the envelope and parchment back into his trunk.

"What'd you get, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, an O, you?"

"An O as well."

"Is that your first O, Potter? Judging by your work in Potions it has to be," Draco Malfoy said from the doorway, flanked by his usually cohorts Crabbe and Goyle. Harry and Hermione turned to look at him.

"Hardly, Malfoy," Harry responded. "Some of us can actually manage to fight a Boggart, and not get mauled by a friendly Hippogriff."

"If you insist. I never felt those half-breeds knew anything worth teaching anyway. But I got rid of that filth readily enough. Hagrid won't last through the year. See, when you actually have influence, you can do things like that," Draco sneered. Harry didn't feel like pointing out that he had been responsible for more teachers leaving the school than Draco had.

"Just go away, Malfoy, none of us care about your vaunted influence," Harry said.

"Oh, come now. I just wanted to see who your pen pal was this summer. The great Harry Potter should have warranted someone special. I doubt you can top mine. I had Viktor Krum," Draco boasted. Ron went furiously red and looked ready to tear up his potions essay.

"Good for you," Harry responded with a faux cheerfulness, hoping that acting like he didn't care, or feel jealous, would make Malfoy leave sooner.

"Yes. We exchanged Quidditch tips. He said he thinks I could be really talented and will easily make one of the English league teams when I'm done in school. Said even he could learn things from me. Said we had a lot in common."

"Really?" Harry couldn't help but laugh. "Like what, how to lose in the championship game? Because you guys do have that in common." Harry felt slightly bad about the jab at Krum. He had flown magnificently, and Harry wished he was that talented, but he couldn't resist taking the shot at Malfoy.

"Oh yes, get cocky, Potter. I'll show you with the tournament this year." Malfoy spat.

"What tournament?" Hermione asked.

"You mean you don't know?" Malfoy laughed, shaking his head as if he was dealing with children. "Doesn't Weasley here have family members that actually work at the Ministry, and Gringotts? He should know. Father told me months ago!" He said 'work' as if it was a distasteful word.

"What are you talking about?" Ron growled. Malfoy just laughed more.

"I can't believe you don't know!" he took a minute to recover from his laughter. "Come on guys. Let's get back to our compartment. These fools are so far out of the loop it's almost not funny!" he laughed more and walked away, followed closely by Crabbe and Goyle.

"What was he talking about?" Ron asked again, his face flushed red in anger.

"I have no idea," Hermione responded.

"It doesn't matter, he's just being an ass," Harry said.

"Think he really got Krum as a pen pal?" Ron asked, looking down at his potions essay.

"Who knows? Is he even still in school? I mean I know he's young. If he did, it was probably through a bribe or something," Hermione said. Ron just sulked more.

"Still, why can't I ever have that. Always money, and now he gets to be friends with Krum. That's just not fair," Ron brooded. Both Harry and Hermione knew he just needed some time to get over it. Hermione slid next to him in the compartment, leaning close to him. So close Harry almost felt jealous.

"Oh don't worry. Did you finish your essay?" she asked, sounding as sweet as she could.

"Yea." Ron nodded. "Here." He handed it to her. She started to read it, commenting on things he needed to change as she did. Ron wasn't really paying attention. Harry continued to stare out the window.

The rest of the trip to the castle was uneventful. Harry was starving by the time everyone was in the castle. He hoped the headmaster would keep his speech brief, or perhaps just have it after the feast. He should have had a bigger breakfast or a few more chocolate frogs on the train.

Thankfully, Dumbledore did simply open with a few odd words before instructing the students to eat. Harry grabbed some of whatever appeared closest to him, not particularly caring right now, simply being hungry.

"No new defense teacher," Hermione stated as she cut up a few pieces of chicken.

"Really?" Harry said, looking up at the staff table. Sure enough, there was no new professor.

"I wonder who's filling in," Ron commented. Nearly-Headless Nick took that moment to float by.

"Oh, there's a new professor," the ghost said. "He just appears to be late. Seems the elves prepared another wonderful feast this year." Harry heard a loud clank from the plate next to his. He saw Hermione dropped her fork onto her plate.

"Elves?" she asked. "Elves? Elves are enslaved here?"

"Certainly," Nick responded, floating away. "How else do you think everything gets done?"

"Elves!" Hermione spat. Harry sensed she was going on loop and returned to his food, too hungry to worry about elf rights at that point.

When the feast finished, Dumbledore rose and approached the podium once more.

"Welcome or welcome back to another year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. We are looking at a very unique year this year. First, although he appears to be running late, I will announce our staff changes. Replacing Professor Lupin as the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor will be former Auror, Alastor Moody." A murmur ran through the crowd. Many of the Slytherins looked around sheepishly.

"Alastor Moody?" Harry asked under his breath to Ron.

"Dark wizard catcher. One of the best. Supposedly he's a little insane, but they say half the cells in Azkaban are filled because of him," Ron responded. "Dad thinks he's great."

"Also. Our caretaker, Mr. Filch, has requested once again that you view the list of banned items on his office door. Possession of any of them will result in a detention. Also, the Forbidden Forest remains forbidden to all students.

"Now, it is my honor to announce that-" Dumbledore's announcement was interrupted with a loud clang from the doors of the Great Hall.

"That's him," Ron said from Harry's side, a sense of awe in his voice. Harry couldn't help but be impressed as the imposing figure worked his way up to the staff table. The clank of the fake leg echoing through the now quiet hall. His electric blue eye shot around the room. Harry would have sworn it lingered on some of the Slytherins, but he couldn't be sure. He knew it was probably just his personal prejudices coming out.

Of course, it didn't help that he also thought Moody's eye lingered for a little bit too long on him. Eventually, Dumbledore started to speak again.

"Well, now that Alastor has arrived," Dumbledore said with a nod toward Moody, who sat at the staff table. "It is my pleasure to announce that Hogwarts will host the return of the Triwizard Tournament." Again there was a murmur through the crowd.

"At the end of October students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will arrive to attend the tournament. Many of you will get a chance to meet your pen pal from the summer assignments. We expect the finest behavior from our students while we host this event.

"As some of you know, the Triwizard Tournament consists of champions from each of the schools competing against each other in a series of tasks. This will still be the main focus of the tournament. Students will be required to be seventeen at the time of

entry to be able to compete." This time the murmur from the crowd had a very dissatisfied feel. Harry briefly pictured himself as the champion. But only briefly.

"Except, in addition to the champions competition, there will be many other competitions. Just about every club or team that the schools share will be in competition at some point during the year. Heads of the clubs will receive more information about that in the coming weeks. The tournament itself will be highlighted by four main competitions.

"The first of the other competitions is, naturally, the competition between the individual champions. The second competition will be dueling competitions between students from each institution. As Hogwarts does not have a dueling club, the students will be picked by Professors Flitwick and Snape after a tryout held next week." There was another murmur through the crowd. Most of the Slytherins looked a little bit too happy about that.

"The third competition will be an academic knowledge competition with students answering questions on subjects taught in each school.

"And finally. There will be an interschool Quidditch tournament. Professor Hooch will be hosting tryouts for that. You do not have to be on a house team to tryout. Those tryouts will be this coming Saturday." Harry perked up a little bit about that. If Krum was really still at Durmstrang he may be able to compete against him. He'd certainly be trying out for the Quidditch team.

"And with that," Dumbledore continued, "I hope you all have a successful year and compete to your fullest while representing the school. Classes will begin tomorrow as usual. Have a pleasant evening back." The headmaster then returned to his seat and the Great Hall exploded with conversation. Everyone was talking about some part of the tournament, and it seemed that everyone wanted to participate with their favorite club.

The discussions continued well after the feast ended and the students went back to their common rooms.

"I'm going to go out for the Quidditch team," Ron said as the trio sat in their usual spots. There was a hallow laugh from behind them.

"As what? A water boy?" Fred asked.

"Or a towel boy?" George commented.

"Oh shut up you two," Ron said. "You know I'm not a bad keeper. I was going to go out for that this year anyway."

"I'm going to go out for chaser, too," Ginny added as she walked by. Ron looked up at her.

"But you're not even on a house team!" He commented.

"Either are you. And Wood didn't have tryouts last year. We'll see. It can't hurt to tryout. Be nice to get a bunch of Gryffindors on the team. Hopefully more of us than Harry make it."

"What?" Harry asked.

"Oh come on, Harry," George said. "You only lose when you fall off. You're pretty much a lock."

"Cedric beat me," Harry said, but he was proud the others thought he was a sure thing. "I'm not sure I'd have beaten him to the snitch even had I not fallen."

"Well, fly better than him on Saturday and you're in," Fred said.

"Are you two going to try out?" He asked.

"Probably," George replied.

"Since we can't enter the individual thing, we may as well," Fred added.

"You two are good. You should make it," Harry said.

"We appreciate your confidence," Fred replied in a way that made Harry feel like they expected to make the team regardless.

"So, keeper, eh?" Harry asked, turning back to Ron.

"Yea. It's what I usually played in the yard. I'm not bad."

"Well I hope you make it," Harry said, realizing he probably sounded like he was already on the team, and hoping his friend didn't notice. "I wonder who else will try out?"

"I'd guess pretty much everyone on a house team. And then probably a bunch of others. Saturday is going to be insane," Ron sounded excited.

"Quidditch, really? Usually I don't have to listen to this prattle for at least a few more weeks," Hermione commented from the corner. Ron and Harry both just looked at her and went back to judging players by position. It became clear that if they were picking the team, it would just be Gryffindors.

The first week of classes passed relatively quickly. The only really eventful part was the first lesson with Professor Moody. Harry still felt proud that he was the only one in the class that could throw off an unforgivable curse. He joked he was two for three and secretly hoped he never had to feel the third one. Ron had laughed, Hermione had not found it funny.

Saturday evening found him worn out and sore from flying almost all day as he lounged in front of the fireplace in the common room. Most of the talk was still on the Quidditch tryouts. Harry looked out the window only to notice his snowy owl fly in. She looked at him for a moment, looking rather bored, then trotted over to a first year who was giving treats to her owl. Harry remembered he'd promised to write to Fleur. He felt bad that he'd completely forgotten about his former pen pal in the excitement of the tryouts. He didn't feel like doing his weekend assignments yet, either, so he found a stray bit of parchment and a quill and started to compose a letter.

Dear Fleur,

It's been an interesting week here. One of the more hectic starting weeks I can remember in my four years at school. The Triwizard Tournament! It sounds like it's going to be a blast! I hope you're coming to Hogwarts for it so we can meet. Of course, I believe Beauxbatons is in southern France, so perhaps the wrong school is hosting it for the winter months.

The first week at Hogwarts has been pretty normal. Our new defense teacher, which makes four in four years since I've been

here, some people say the office is cursed, is former Auror Alastor Moody. He's a bit, well, unstable. In the first class he demonstrated the three Unforgivable Curses. He even used the Imperius curse on us. I managed to fight it off, which I was rather proud of. Still, I'm not sure those should have been shown in the classroom. They really shook up my friend, Neville. Moody's logic was that we should be able to identify and fight the curses, but something still felt wrong.

My friend Hermione has taken up the elf rights cause. It's entertaining, in a way, watching everyone think she's crazy for trying to free house elves. I'm not sure what I feel. I mean, slavery is wrong and all, but they seem happy. And the only house elves I've met have been very strange.

I tried out for the school quidditch team today. The tryouts were intense! I'm amazed at the amount of people that showed up. It must have been half the school! Madame Hooch organized everyone by position and then just kept running people through drills all morning. She even made us all use old school brooms to make sure the competition was even. Interestingly enough, Draco Malfoy is even worse when he's not on his nimbus!

After the drills Madame Hooch dismissed about half of the people. I don't think any of them actually left though, just went into the stands instead. She then organized the remaining players into four separate teams and had us play matches against each other. Hooch made me the captain of my team, but we didn't really have enough time to come up with plays or anything. We just had a few simple calls during the matches. Each match lasted about an hour. A new snitch was released if the seeker caught it and we just kept playing for the entire time. It was one of the most intense quidditch things I've done. It was a blast though, even if I'm exhausted now.

I think I had a pretty good tryout. I caught more snitches than anyone else during the games, beating Cedric Diggory by one catch late. And I was consistently fast in the seeker skills drills.

A few of my friends also tried out for the team. Fred and George Weasley, who are on the house team with me, had a great showing in the beater skills drills, especially when they were working in groups. Madame Hooch split them for the games though, and they each suffered a bit there. But I still think they were in the top for beater groups.

My best friend, Ron Weasley, had an okay tryout. I don't think he did well enough to make the team though. Don't tell him I said that. He was pretty good with the basic skills and positioning for the keeper drills, but in the actual matches he was abysmal. He missed some things that should have been pretty easy saves. He was okay to start, but once he got scored on a few times he just lost it.

Their sister, Ginny, also came to the tryouts. She went out for chaser and had a pretty good day. I don't think she was good enough to usurp any of the house team chasers, but she may have a shot at making the Gryffindor team next year if she keeps improving. She was the opposite of her brother, too. She wasn't the best at the basic drills, but flourished in the actual games.

I think the rest of my house teammates also had good showings, but we were split up for the entire second half of the day, and I was focusing more on myself than the others.

Your friend, Lilly, had a great tryout. She was tops in the speed drills for the chasers, and about middle of the pack in shooting. Madame Hooch also made her the captain of her team for the matches, and they won every match but one, despite having Ron as the keeper. She and Ginny worked very well together.

The final team should be posted by next week. Of course, it is subject to change if someone on it becomes an individual champion and chooses to focus on that instead of Quidditch.

So, how was the first week at Beauxbatons? I hope it was pleasant. I know you're seventeen, so are you going to try to participate in the individual competition? I think it may be fun to represent your school like that, but I'll stick to trying to be the seeker on the quidditch team. Let me know if you're coming. I really look forward to meeting you if you do.

Sincerely,

Harry Potter.

He reread the letter once, hoping that he didn't bore her with the quidditch tryouts, knowing she didn't really care for the game. But still, it was the highlight of his time back at school, so he figured he

should include it. That, and it was really all he could think of to write about.

He called Hedwig over as he slid the parchment into an envelope. His owl landed on the table next to him as he wrote 'Fleur Delacour. Beauxbatons' on the envelope. He showed it to Hedwig.

"Will that be enough to get it to her?" He asked. The owl clucked and pecked him on the forehead in a way that indicated he was stupid for assuming she even needed that much information. Harry couldn't help but laugh as he attached it to her leg. Hedwig didn't move, she simply stared at him. Harry laughed again.

"Stubborn. I'll give you a bunch of treats when you get back, I promise," he said. His owl sized him up for a moment, then flew out the window and on her way. Ron came and sat next to him then.

"Who'd you write to, Padfoot?" He asked.

"No. My pen pal from summer. I told her I would when we got back to school," Harry responded. Ron looked confused.

"Yes, but the assignment is done," Ron said.

"You know, Ronald, not everyone just does things because they're assigned," Hermione said from the corner. She had SPEW badges with her and was knitting a hat. "And that reminds me Harry, let's work on your French a bit more," she ordered. Harry groaned but figured it was better than knitting hats for house elves.

Harry was surprised when Hedwig flew in with the Monday morning post. She must have made great time. She landed next to him and held her leg out impatiently. He recognized the handwriting on the letter immediately and couldn't help but smile as he detached it from his owl. He went to open it when Hedwig nipped him on the hand.

"Ouch!" he nearly yelled before remembering his promise from the other night. He reached into his robe and was lucky enough to have a few treats there. He gave the treats to Hedwig, who munched them down quickly as he opened the reply.

Harry,

I am going to be brief. Your owl is incredibly beautiful, but a tad impatient. I get the strangest feeling she doesn't like me. She found me readily enough in the hall at school, though, which is rather impressive.

We were not exposed to the Unforgivables until our sixth year, so I would say fourth does seem a little early. But we have had the same professor the entire time. I'm not sure what constantly having a new teacher would do to the quality of learning in the class.

Our first week has mostly been preparation for the tournament. We are organizing the teams that will be brought to Hogwarts for the tournament. I agree that the wrong school is hosting the event, but that is because I am not particularly interested in the winter in the United Kingdom.

I will be one of the students coming with Beauxbatons for the tournament. I intend to enter myself into the individual competition, but if that does not work out, I will be fine with being on the academic team if need be. We have not been told how the champions will be picked yet, so I doubt you have been. But if you know, would you mind sharing? Please?

I am glad that you feel your tryout went well. I hope you do make the Hogwarts team so I can get a chance to watch you fly. I look forward to meeting you in person, and it seems we will get that chance in just under two months.

I'd write more, but your owl seems insistent on taking a reply back to you, and I have to finish up some assignments, so until we meet.

Adieu

Fleur.

Author's Note: I planned to start the next chapter with the tryouts, but felt it worked better to include it here. The next chapter will reveal the team, which has already been chosen. Sadly, this is probalby the last chapter to feature letters between the two. I should have probably thought of a better title for the story. This chapter was hastily edited, but I figured I'd post it, and edit it again and repost it later, my upcoming week is just a bit busy so I'm not sure when that update will be. I apologize if there's anything glaringly bad in the text.

As for the tournament itself. I haven't decided if I'll make it more tasks than in the book. If I do, I can't see it going past five. I figured more things going on outside of the champions was more interesting than bringing three institutions together so three students can compete.

As always thanks for the reviews

Chapter Six

Champions

Charms class seemed to take forever. It wasn't that Harry wasn't entertained. He actually enjoyed the class and the diminutive professor. It was just that Madame Hooch had said earlier that the final Quidditch roster would be posted today. Harry hadn't had a chance to check since lunch, and he desperately wanted to rectify that.

"Harry, it's your turn," Hermione said, snapping him out of his daze. He looked at her for a moment, before he remembered the task at hand.

"Oh, right, sorry," he replied and picked his wand up from the desk. He focused on the small clay amphora in front of him. He slashed his wand diagonally down to the left, before cutting it back sharply to the right saying the incantation, "Infragilis," as he did.

The next part of the lesson was much easier, and much more amusing. He reached out and knocked the amphora off the table. It fell to ground with a very unsatisfying shattering noise.

"Too bad, mate," Ron said as he looked over the edge of the table. "Beat me though, three pieces. My best so far is four. Hermione is at three, too, but her brake was cleaner than yours." Harry peered over at it too. The amphora lay on the ground in three perfectly broken pieces.

"Damn," Harry sighed as he picked the pieces up and placed them back on the desk. Hermione glared at him, presumably for cursing, but he ignored it. "Reparo," he muttered and watched the three pieces form back into an amphora. The shattering clashes that emanated from the class around let him know that just about everyone was having trouble with the work.

"You're up, Hermione," Ron said. She slashed her wand through the air and said the incantation clearly. She paused for a moment and took a deep breath and knocked the amphora off the desk. Her face fell when the noise of broken clay accompanied it hitting the ground.

"Tough break," Ron commented, looking over the desk at it again. "Just one of the handles broke off. Hermione looked perturbed, but they still had a good twenty minutes to work on the charm. She picked the two pieces up off of the ground and fastened them back together with a quick mending charm.

"Your turn, Ron," Hermione said after making sure the amphora was in pristine condition. Ron waved his wand and said the incantation. He paused moment before pushing it off the desk in Harry's direction. Again, the shattering sound accompanied it disappearing over the edge of the desk. Ron cursed under his breath, earning him a quick swat from Hermione.

"Three pieces," Harry said, picking them up and placing them back on the desk. "Well, two and a handle." Ron repaired them quickly and set the amphora back up on the desk.

"Well, at least getting to destroy the object again and again is amusing. And we're getting there. You're up, Harry," he said. Harry cast the charm again and knocked the pot off of the desk once more.

"Handle and a chip," Ron said, picking the pieces back up and placing them on the desk. Harry repaired them quickly and gestured to Hermione. She took a deep breath and cast the spell very deliberately before knocking the amphora off the desk once more. This time there was no shattering noise, instead just a hallow thunk as it hit the ground. Harry looked over the edge and saw it was completely intact. Professor Flitwick noticed as well. He waddled over and picked the amphora up, placing it back on the desk.

"Fantastic work Miss Granger!" he said, rather exuberantly. "First in class again, after what, five attempts?"

"Four, sir," Hermione admitted proudly, blushing slightly at the praise.

"Very well done. Ten points to Gryffindor!" Flitwick said before continuing to cycle around the room.

"Alright. Now you two get it," Hermione ordered. "Harry, I think you're coming too far back on your slash. Try it again." Harry sighed. As much as he loved Hermione, he hated when she turned into Professor Granger after performing a spell once. Oh well, at least he

still had a much better Patronus than she did. He went through the motions once more, ignoring the advice Hermione gave.

"Just a small chip," Ron said as he picked the amphora up off the ground. Harry repaired it and Ron tried again, getting the same results he got the time before. Hermione said something as Ron took his turn, but Harry didn't pay that much attention because he knew he'd get it on his next try. He disagreed with Hermione's insistence on perfect technique every time. Magic, to him, was as much about intent and understanding as anything else.

After class Hermione continued to prattle on about the unbreakable charm. She seemed content to once again go over every single detail of it, despite the fact that they had just sat through a lecture, and essentially mastered the charm in class. Harry found himself wondering if there was a charm that would transcribe everything she said into his notes, so he simply wouldn't have to bother taking them in class. He made a mental note to ask Flitwick about that.

"Are you two even listening?" she snapped after a few minutes. Harry looked quickly over at Ron, who was gazing off in the other direction.

"Of course we are," Harry said indignantly as he tried to see what Ron was looking at.

"Oh, well, where was I?" Hermione asked sweetly. Harry had fallen for this trap before. By not answering her correctly here, he would be admitting not only that he wasn't listening, but that he lied about it too. Thankfully, he finally saw what Ron was looking at. Madame Hooch and Roger Davies were chatting in a corner of the hallway. They were looking over a piece of paper. Davies seemed to be asking questions as he pointed at it.

"Hang on a second, Hermione," Harry said as he watched. He could sense Hermione wasn't happy with being put on the back-burner like that.

"What do you suppose they're talking about?" Ron asked as Hooch seemed to be explaining something. Davies didn't argue. He appeared to agree with Hooch's reasoning of whatever he had questioned, and moved on to the next point.

"Has to be something to do with the team," Harry said.

"But why Davies," Ron asked. "He's not good and he had a mediocre try out." Harry sensed the animosity there. Davies's tryout was rather good, truth be told. Harry suspected Ron was just bitter about the fifteen goals the Ravenclaw scored on him.

"He and Diggory are senior and Diggory didn't have that great of a tryout," Harry said. "With Flint and Wood gone they're the only two at the school with Captain experience."

"But Davies didn't fly that well either!" Ron scoffed.

"Fifteen for eighteen on you seems pretty well. Then again a pygmy puff would have probably made a better keeper, Weasley," Draco Malfoy said as he walked past.

"I'm sorry, Malfoy, but how many members of the Slytherin team even made it past the first cut?" Harry asked, not taking his eyes off Hooch and Davies as they continued their discussion.

"The tryouts were unfair. We were hindered by inferior brooms. Father has already heard about it. The situation will be rectified," Draco sneered.

"You do realize everyone was on the same broom, right?" Hermione said. "Meaning that you're admitting you're a product of the equipment, and not actually skilled."

"Shut up, Mudblood. Your kind are lucky they're even allowed to watch Quidditch," Draco spat. Unfortunately for him, his insult came right as Professor McGonagall emerged from her office.

"Ten points from Slytherin for the derogatory insult, Mr. Malfoy, and detention tonight," she said, continuing on her way to the Great Hall for the evening meal. Malfoy looked like he'd just sucked on a lemon. Harry thought he would say something else, but he decided to simply go to dinner instead. It may have had something to do with McGonagall staring back at the group from down the hall.

"Hermione," Ron said, "that was the perfect line." He was still smirking about it, too.

"Thank you, Ron. I wonder if his father can really pull some strings and rig the tournament?"

"I doubt it," Ron replied. "I mean, it works just fine with Slytherin house. But he got kicked off the board of governors after second year, and the rest of the governors are going to want to win the tournament too much to let him meddle. They know Hooch will have picked the best team.

"Oh, faith in Madame Hooch now? After chastising her talking to Davies over there?" Hermione teased. Ron blushed red and muttered something about 'not that good' under his breath.

Harry kept watching the two talk for a few more minutes, before they seemed to agree. Hooch rolled up the parchment and started walking off toward the Great Hall. Roger Davies looked up and glanced around the hallway. Harry assumed he was looking for his friends, who likely had gone ahead to the Great Hall. The Ravenclaw's eyes met Harry's and he gave him a quick nod with a smile.

"I wonder what that's about?" Hermione asked.

"Me too," Harry said. "Looks like Hooch is going to post the team though, let's head to the hall and find out." Harry hurried after the flight instructor, thinking perhaps he was a little too eager to see the results. Hermione rolled her eyes but accompanied the two boys as they checked their fates.

The Entrance Hall was packed with students by the time the trio arrived. They all cluttered around the small bulletin board. Harry approached and fought his way through the masses with Ron at his side.

"That's bullshit," he overheard a Slytherin beater say.

"Oh come on," a Hufflepuff muttered.

"You've got to be kidding me. I had a much better tryout than her! So did you," Angelina Johnson said to Katie Bell.

Harry took a deep breath before he stepped up to the posted parchment. His eyes scanned the top of the list before slowly sliding down over the names.

The following players will represent Hogwarts in the upcoming quidditch tournament as a supplementary part of the Triwizard Tournament.

Starting Roster:

Keeper: Herbert Fleet – Hufflepuff

Left Beater: Fred Weasley – Gryffindor

Right Beater: George Weasley – Gryffindor

Left Wing Chaser: Roger Davies – Ravenclaw "C"

Right Wing Chaser: Alicia Spinnet – Gryffindor

Center Chaser: Lillian Sesion – Ravenclaw "A"

Seeker: Harry Potter – Gryffindor "A"

Reserved Roster:

Keeper: Cormac McLaggen – Gryffindor

Beater: Titus Button – Slytherin

Chaser: Malcolm Preece – Hufflepuff

Seeker: Cho Chang – Ravenclaw

Utility: Ginevra Weasley – Gryffindor

Players on the team will be expected to report to an opening practice to pick up their uniforms and brooms this Saturday morning at eight. Bring nothing but yourself. Congratulations to the final twelve.

Harry couldn't help but smile as he stared at his name on the list. He swelled with pride as he saw the ink marked "A" next to it. That had

to have been what Hooch and Davies had been discussing in the hallway.

"Holy shit! I made the team!" he heard Ginny say from his side.

"Ginny! Language!" Hermione said from behind him. Harry couldn't help but laugh.

"Congratulations, Ginny," he said, smiling at the younger girl. She blushed but hugged him.

"Thanks Harry! And you, alternate captain, how cool is that?" she said.

"It's pretty cool." Harry blushed.

"Wonder what it means about brooms?" George asked. Harry realized he was still hugging Ginny and let go. If he didn't know better he'd assume that the girl was disappointed with that.

"Beats me," Harry said. "Guess we'll just have to find out on Saturday. Where'd Ron go?"

"No idea," Fred commented. "Probably to eat. Git can't have expected to make the team after that tryout though."

"Yea," George added. "We love him and all, but wow did he ever choke."

"I wonder what the practices will be like?" Ginny asked, likely simply to move the topic off of her youngest brother.

"No idea. It'll be interesting to see if Hooch runs it or Davies. She's technically the coach, you know. But Roger built a pretty strong Ravenclaw team. With Wood gone they may have been the favorites this year." Fred said.

"You think? I mean, we're bringing back the entire team except for Wood," Harry said.

"Yea, but keeper is huge. We know anything about Fleet?" George asked.

"Great save percentage, covers all of the hoops very well. Hufflepuff just didn't play that great of defense in front of him," Ginny answered. "This tournament is going to be awesome!"

"Yes it should be. We'll George and I are going to prepare a party in the common room for later. Congratulations Harry, Congratulations Ginny." Fred said as the twins left.

Harry found Ron at their usual spot at the Gryffindor table. He was sulking, so Harry simply sat next to him and started to pick out some food for dinner. Hermione sat herself between the two and continued her post-lecture comments on the unbreakable charm. Harry ignored her. His eyes slid around the hall to the various people who would soon be his teammates. Davies and Seslion sat near each other, their heads close, both looking down at something. Cho was next to them, talking to one of her friends. Fleet sat with his girlfriend, a plain looking Hufflepuff. They were snogging. Alicia wasn't anywhere to be seen, and Fred and George were off planning their party.

Harry's eyes shifted for the reserves. Ginny was just a few seats down from him at the table, she was chatting happily with some of her friends. Cormac McLaggen was at the other end of the table, bragging loudly. Harry scanned the Slytherin table. He didn't know which one Titus Button was, and nothing seemed to give him away, if he were even there. Preece sat at the opposite end of the Hufflepuff table, talking with Diggory as they both ate.

Harry scanned the Great Hall one last time before going back to his meal, half listening to Hermione as she spoke of the charm. At the very least he was glad she was eating again, if only that he didn't have to listen to elf rights speeches during meal times.

Saturday came quickly. Harry groggily rose early and cleaned himself up. He looked at his Firebolt for a few moments before closing his trunk and heading down into the common room. Ginny was coming down at the same time.

"Hey Harry," she yawned. "It's far too early to be up on a Saturday."

"Yea. It is. Grab some breakfast before heading to the pitch?" He asked.

"That was my plan. Heard the twins bumbling around down here earlier, so they're probably at the Great Hall already." Ginny moved toward the portrait hole. She was dressed in athletic shorts and a tank top, her hair pulled back into a pony tail. Harry couldn't help but think she looked rather cute as he followed her out of the portrait.

They sat next to the twins and Alicia at the Gryffindor table. They were the only Gryffindors in the hall at that point, and the five of them accounted for half of the people eating breakfast at the early hour before practice. They didn't really talk, but rather just ate and sipped some tea, waiting until the appropriate time to walk down to the pitch. Harry just nibbled on some toast, and ate one egg, in silence.

At about ten to eight the group headed out to the pitch. Hooch and Davies were waiting, Davies looking like he just arrived just a little before the Gryffindors. They all waited quietly, Hooch's hawk-like eyes surveying the pitch as the other players arrived. Harry thought they looked like a rather motley bunch, all in various states of athletic clothing, none of them really sure what they should do. They stood in house groups and waited.

At five minutes to eight the entire team had arrived, the last two being Fleet and Preece. Hooch looked everyone over and the players.

"Congratulations on making the team. We now have a couple of months of solid practice before the tournament starts. We will practice on Monday, Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday. Monday and Wednesday will begin promptly at eight in the evening. Saturday will begin at eight in the morning. And Sunday will begin at six in the morning with three hours of calisthenics. We will brake for lunch, and then reconvene at three o'clock for a full practice. The schedule will change when the tournament begins, but will still be just as rigorous." Hooch's voice was cold and perfectly even. "Are there any questions?"

There was a slight murmur from the players, but no questions came out of it.

"Good. Now follow me into your newly redesigned locker rooms," Hooch said and turned toward the small building at the end of the pitch.

Harry gasped when he entered the building. Last year it had simply been a few lockers and a separate changing room and showers. Now it was easily twice the size, if not larger. The players walked into what was nearly a lounge, with chairs and couches around. There was a separate changing room still, and two separate showers. The back wall was dominated by twelve large open air cubbies. They were each wooden and started about two feet off the ground and extended up about six more feet. Hanging in each, back facing the players were their Hogwarts uniforms. They were black, with a set of four thin stripes on each elbow, representing the houses, red followed by yellow, blue, and green. On the front was a large version of the Hogwarts crest, smaller ones appeared on each shoulder. Between the stripes and the logo on the arm was the player's number as well. Harry noticed they were numbered by position, in the way many national teams did. Being the seeker, he had seven. The name and numbers on the back were yellow.

His eyes scanned the rest of the names, Fleet above one, F. Weasley above two, Ge. Weasley above three, Davies above four, Spinnet above five, and Seslion above six. Harry stared up at his own then, the 'Potter' curved slightly above the '7' and he couldn't help but smirk.

"This is," George started.

"Awesome," Fred finished, fingering his uniform carefully.

"You got that right boys," Lilly added.

"Yes. Make yourselves comfortable. This will practically be your second home. Under your main uniforms, folded at the bottom, you'll find your practice uniforms. Each player has been given three. They'll be cleaned twice a week if left in your locker. Change into those. I'll be back in a few minutes." She left the locker room. Harry walked up to his locker, seeing the other players doing the same to theirs.

The practice uniform was close to the same as the other, except it was white and seemed to be made of a lighter material. Harry held his up and looked at it. He fingered the yellow 'A' that would be

above his right breast, smiling a little bit. He pulled his on, shifting his shoulders a bit to see how it felt. Naturally, it fit perfectly.

"Wow, George, have you seen this?" Harry turned to see what Fred had asked.

"They've given us new bats, and new pads, and a full set of equipment," George said, holding up the new bat.

"I've gotten two new sets of keeper pads too," Fleet said.

"Me too," McLaggen commented from Harry's right.

"They certainly do want to win," Davies said from Harry's left. "Let's not let them down."

"Hell yes," Fred said. "I wonder if we get to keep it all."

"You do, Weasley. You also get to keep these." Hooch held up a broom. She had twelve more following behind her. She banished them slowly, one at a time, toward each of the players. Harry caught his and examined it. Fleet said what he was thinking.

"But I rather like my broom."

"I'm sure you do, Fleet. However, this tournament is bigger than your personal preferences. I actually fought against this, but certain transportation companies decided to back their nations, and buy a large amount of sponsorship. It seems with the increased cost of floo and portkey travel, some mostly Muggle companies feel they can build and market new brooms. You will be flying on the newly designed Lotus LE1, a prototype sports broom. Beauxbatons will be on the Renault R1 and Durmstrang will be flying on the on the Mercedes MB1." Harry looked down and saw the Lotus logo on the end of his broom. He examined it carefully as Hooch spoke. It seemed like a nice broom, not quite as nice as his Firebolt, but.

"How do they fly?" Davies asked. Harry could see Roger was examining his broom just as carefully as he was.

"Fairly well. They're certainly on par with anything Cleansweep or Nimbus has come up with. The acceleration and the turning are amazing, and the top speed is fairly good. The companies claimed

to model them after some Muggle race car. They aren't Firebolts, though. They're going to market them as a more 'sporty' broom for middle-aged clientele with a disposable income," Hooch explained. "And the R1 and MB1 are supposed to have the same specifications as the Lotuses, but only time will tell there. At the very least it prevents someone from buying Firebolts for their school's team. Or offering to." Hooch shook her head at that idea. Harry wondered if someone had tried.

"Well, what's on our agenda for today, Coach?" Davies asked.

"Today is just an easy day. I want you to get the hang of to the brooms. Our real practice regimen will start tomorrow. We're just going to do basic drills by position. Weasley, you're on the roster as the twelfth flyer, as such I'm going to shuffle you around a lot. Today fly with Potter and Chang," Hooch ordered.

"Yes, coach," Ginny said as the team started out. Harry stepped in behind the 11 'Chang' and the 12 'Gi. Weasley' as they walked out to the pitch.

The first practice was easy and light. They flew around on their new brooms and learned the strength and weaknesses of the new model. Harry didn't mind the Lotus, of course Harry had yet to get on a broom he minded. He rather liked the mobility it provided, although after his Firebolt the top speed did leave something to be desired. He spent a good portion of time watching the trio of Weasley's fly, each with a giant smile plastered on their faces. Harry hoped Ron wouldn't be too jealous of his siblings. Maybe one of them would give him their old broom.

The second day of practice was the exact opposite. Hooch dragged them through just about every physical drill Harry could think of. They ran, they did sit-ups and push-ups, then they ran some more. When they finally limped to lunch, which was provided in the locker room and not in the Great Hall, none of the players knew how they were going to go back out to the pitch after their break.

They managed, though. Hooch ran them through even more drills than Wood had the year before. By the time the six Gryffindor players went back to the common room they may as well have been the walking dead. Even Angelina Johnson and Katie Bell, who were both annoyed they didn't make the team, didn't say anything. Ron

was still brooding. He hadn't spoken to Harry or his family members since he learned they all got a full set of new Quidditch gear. Of course, they hadn't had that much time to chat.

The six collapsed in a heap in the corner of the common room.

"I hurt, everywhere," McLaggen said.

"Me too," Fred responded.

"And that was just day one," Ginny added, eliciting a groan from everyone.

"Well. At least we'll all improve during the year," Harry said, trying to remain positive.

"Yea, train up another group to win the house tournament next year," McLaggen said.

"That's the spirit," Alicia said. "You did make some great saves today, Cormac. I was amazed you weren't falling off your broom like the rest of us."

"Oh I was," Cormac laughed. "But I just had to float there and try to get my body in front of it. More lucky than anything. I have to say though, our chaser line is amazing together. I could barely track them today. Fleet was saying the same thing, too. We should be able to score in bunches."

"Yes we should," Ginny said proudly. She'd flown as a chaser that afternoon, and flown well. "How's that third beater?"

"Button?" George asked, as if he hadn't quite heard the question. "He's pretty good, too. He got kicked off the Slytherin team because Malfoy wanted his cronies on it. Told Flint he wouldn't fly for Slytherin again. Malfoy even threatened to curse him if he didn't give the numbus back."

"What'd he do about that?"

"Hit Malfoy upside the head with it and walked back to the dungeons, apparently. Explains that welt he had for a while last year." All six players laughed, drawing some looks from the common room.

"You do all realize we have practice again tomorrow, right?" Harry said when the laughing subsided, eliciting another groan from the players involved.

"Hooch is going to kill us," Alicia responded.

"Probably," Ginny said. "And if she doesn't the other professors will. I still have a charms essay to finish for tomorrow. I should go do that." She left and a short time later the rest of the players went to finish their respective assignments.

Harry walked up to his dormitory after finishing his defense assignment. He planned on making up some Divination homework and sleep. Knowing his luck he'd accomplish the second well before the first.

He'd already changed when he noticed Ron was sitting on his bed, staring up at the ceiling.

"What's up, mate? Want to work on the divination assignment?" he asked. Ron turned and looked at him.

. "No." His friend snapped.

"Well what's up man?" Harry asked, trying his best to sound like a supporting friend.

"Why do you always get everything. Never me. Even my sister gets more than I do," he grumbled.

"You just had a bad tryout. You'll make up for it next year. You can get to the house team then," Harry said.

"Easy for you to say. With the alternate captaincy you'll probably replace Wood. And McLaggen is going to get all the practice during the tournament," Ron spat.

"You can usurp him. Just practice more," Harry said. As he thought of it, he wasn't sure when he last saw Ron actually practice. If he had the capability to over the summer, he'd probably send most of it on a broom. Of course, he'd told himself that he'd learn French in his

free time over the summer. In fairness, though, he actually enjoyed quidditch.

"Oh sure, practice more. Easy for you to say, Mr. Natural." Ron glared at him. Harry just rolled his eyes.

"Fine, mate. I'm going to work on my Divination. Talk to you in the morning," Harry said calmly. He threw himself down on his bed, closed the curtains, and worked on thinking of new ways he could maim himself in the future.

The first part of the school year passed quickly. Ron never quite came out of his funk, but Harry didn't really notice. Hooch really did drill them constantly. But the team started to bond rather closely in the brief moments of downtime they had.

Their locker room became a bit more of a common room for the players. At first because after long practices they simply didn't feel like walking back to their respective common rooms, but later because they started to enjoy each others' company.

They also learned that homework was a lot easier in a group than not. Harry found himself learning parts of the older students' curriculum from Davies as he helped others with assignments. He also picked up a little arithmancy and some ancient runes.

The most helpful by far, though, was Roger's transfiguration skill and Lilly's potions abilities. They single handedly eased the rest of the team through two of the toughest subjects the school offered.

Lilly even took to teaching them some French, mostly quidditch terms, simply so they wouldn't be at a disadvantage when trying to decipher what commands the Beauxbatons team shouted.

They were going to do the same with Durmstrang, too, but no one was sure what the primary language of that institution was.

The team settled into a routine. For the weekday practices they met up about an hour before, worked on some homework and talked. Sometimes Harry, Roger and Lilly discussed strategy and hand signals.

After practice they usually showered and lazed around, finishing up whatever assignments they had left to do. Usually, they got back into Hogwarts a few minutes before lights-out and returned to their respective common rooms.

Weekend practices worked much the same, except they typically took their breakfast in the locker room, and then spent the rest of the day there or on the pitch. They became slightly reclusive from the rest of the school, but none of them seemed to mind.

Harry wasn't sure any of the professors would admit it, either, but he thought that the teachers were being easier on the members of the team.

Harry could tell too, after a month and a half of grueling practice, that he was in much better shape than he had been before. The entire team was. Where their Sunday morning workout had been grueling before, now it was easier. Most of the team even went for runs in the morning now. Harry was surprised at how invigorating a jog around the lake could be.

The actual practices with Hooch were still every bit as grueling. Each time they thought they were coming up to where Madame Hooch wanted them, she pushed them harder and harder. Some of the people who didn't make the team had taken to coming and watching the practices. On occasion, if Hooch needed another chaser or beater for a drill, she'd invite some of the more loyal ones up. It became apparently quickly that the twelve flying regularly were considerably better than the counterparts who didn't make the team.

Some of the other students even started to train, off the pitch, with them. Ron Weasley showed up a couple of times, but complained about all of the running and eventually stopped coming.

Draco Malfoy never once showed up and acted as if the quidditch team didn't exist.

Harry wished he'd come back. It would have gone a long way to help his chances for the house team next year. And while it was clear now that Fleet was a superior keeper to McLaggen, even McLaggen recognized that, it was becoming more and more clear that it would be very hard for Gryffindor's captain to not simply let Cormac onto the team.

Sure, there were moments when he was arrogant on the pitch, but Davies, Hooch, and the superior play of Fleet kept him in line.

Harry was amazed he ever went to class. He certainly barely remembered much of what went on in them. He actually started to use one of the homework planners Hermione had gotten him, simply to make sure that he did keep his assignments in order. Most of the team felt the same way. Never before had their school year completely revolved around quidditch. Harry absolutely loved it.

The only downside was that between quidditch and his class work he had very little time for anything else. Of course, that meant he didn't have to put up with Ron's brooding or Hermione's lectures on house elves, but it also meant that he saw very little of his two best friends.

He also hadn't had a chance to write to either Sirius or Fleur. Of course, neither had written to him, either. Sirius probably had better things to worry about, but he wasn't sure what was on Fleur's schedule, so the lack of correspondence hurt just a little.

And that was how Harry found himself, on the evening of the thirtieth of October, standing next to the Weasley twins and Hermione, waiting for the other schools to arrive. The team had decided to get a quick practice in that evening, and very nearly missed the arrivals when Hooch came flying out to the pitch to yell at them.

The team scrambled back to the locker room and changed quickly before making their way to the main entrance hall. Harry noticed McLaggen was standing next to Hermione, trying rather unsuccessfully to engage her in conversation.

"How do you think they'll get here?" Harry asked, mostly to Hermione, to rescue her from the unwanted conversation.

"No idea," she answered. "You didn't think to ask Fleur?"

"I've been too busy to even write to her," Harry admitted. Hermione snorted a little bit.

"If you insist," she said knowingly. Harry rolled his eyes.

"Sorry I haven't been hanging around much. But I don't need both you and Ron being put off with my presence," he said.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, sounding hurt. "It's just I never see you! Only in our core classes! And Ron has been in a right foul mood all year."

"I know. I'm sorry about that. I'll try to come back to the common room early. But it's been tough with the practices. They really are worse than anything Wood ever made us do."

"Yes, I've watched. But look at you, Harry," Hermione smirked and reached out to pinch his bicep. "You're almost not a twig. You may actually impress this Fleur now." She smirked at his blush.

"Oh quiet," He said. He looked up to avoid having to look at her, knowing he'd just wind up blushing more. "Hey, what's that?" He asked, seeing something in the sky that appeared to be moving toward the school.

"I have no idea. That has to be people from one of the schools. It looks absolutely huge," Hermione said as other students began to point and comment. It only took it a few more minutes for the object to become more visible.

"It's a carriage," Harry said dumbly.

"Yes," George said. "Pulled by giant Pegasus or something."

"Maybe Abraxan." Hermione responded. The carriage circled around the castle once before the giant horses came to a quick landing not too far from the entrance. The entire school waited impatiently in the cold air.

After a few more minutes a gigantic woman, who reminded Harry of Hagrid led the Beauxbatons students off of the carriage. Harry couldn't count how many there were, but he immediately understood why the house tables in the Great Hall had been elongated

Harry let his eyes scan the crowd. The girls all wore the same blue silk outfit, down to the hat. The boys wore blue robes rather similar to the standard Hogwarts outfit. Harry heard the giant woman say something to Dumbledore, but he was too busy scanning through

the Beauxbatons students to hear the conversation. He was looking for Fleur, and he was looking for potential quidditch opponents.

Of course, it was then he realized that he had no idea what Fleur Delacour looked like. He looked around to see if Lilly was anywhere near him to point her out, but she was nowhere to be seen.

"Which one is Fleur?" Hermione asked from his side.

"I don't know," Harry said. "Never asked her what she looked like." How he pictured her always changed, depending on the situation. Of course, it probably didn't help that the majority of the time he thought of her was as he curled up in bed, thinking of companionship, or someone to make his muscles hurt a little less before he fell asleep. Of late, that companion tended to look awfully similar to female members of the Quidditch team.

"That's too bad. I'm sure you'll meet her soon enough," Hermione said.

"I guess," Harry said. He watched as Hagrid directed the Beauxbaton's carriage over toward a part of the grounds by the lake, where he assumed it would stay the rest of the year.

A few moments later Roger Davies moved next to him. They talked quietly, as not to draw the ire of the nearby Professor McGonagall. They were going over some new hand signals that felt more efficient than the old ones they'd been using when a ship emerged from the lake. Harry and Roger were both caught off guard as it did.

They turned their attention to it and watched as a heavily clad robed man approached with a group of fur-clad students following behind him. The bulky robes and fur hats made it difficult for Harry to differentiate between the sexes as the Durmstrang students approached.

"Would you look at that," Roger said, gesturing to the side of the man who must have been the Durmstrang headmaster. "That little Slytherin bastard was right." Harry looked to where Davies gestured.

"Krum," Harry said, recognizing the figure immediately.

"Honestly," Hermione said as she watched a group of Hufflepuffs swooned as Krum walked past. "He's just a quidditch player!" Davies paused and looked at her, like he couldn't believe she just said that.

"She doesn't get it, does she?" The Hogwarts captain said as his eyes followed Krum.

"No, she doesn't. No offense, Hermione," Harry said as his friend just snorted and rolled her eyes.

"Well, Harry, looks like you may get to fly directly against the best. Bet that gives you chills," Roger said.

"If he plays, I look forward to it," Harry replied, trying to sound confident. The truth was he didn't think he could match Krum in a direct match. His memories of the feints Krum pulled at the World Cup came back as the Hogwarts students followed the Durmstrang students into the hall.

Harry took his usual seat at the Gryffindor table. Ron barely looked at him as he sat down. Harry's eyes scanned the Ravenclaw table, where most of the Beauxbaton's students had decided to sit. He found Lilly, Roger, and Cho, who all sat near each other. If Lilly was friends with Fleur, she sure wasn't showing her friend around Hogwarts yet.

A strikingly beautiful blonde girl spoke to the giant woman near the end of the table. A few other Beauxbaton's students joined in that conversation.

"I don't believe it. That git can't have been right," Ron said, causing Harry to look up. Ron's eyes were focused directly on Draco Malfoy's head. It took Harry a moment to realize that Draco was talking animatedly with the imposing figure that sat next to him.

"Apparently he was. Bet his dad bought that," Harry said.

"I don't care if his father bought it," Ron spat. "Why does Draco Effing Malfoy get to be friends with Viktor Krum!"

"I'm sure they're not friends," Harry said. "I bet Krum is used to people like Malfoy and can see straight through him." Ron simply

continued to brood. Harry realized just how little time he'd spent with his friend this year.

"I can't believe that," Ron said, unable to take his eyes off of Malfoy and Krum.

"Hey Ron, why don't we go flying tomorrow night. Stop by the pitch after practice?" Harry said, hoping to distract his friend. Ron just shrugged.

"Okay, sure, after the Champion selection," Ron said. Harry had completely forgotten about the individual aspect of the tournament. He wondered if Ron was entertaining ideas of trying to enter.

Harry didn't have much time to contemplate that as Dumbledore started his welcoming speech a moment later. Since Harry was starving from practice and waiting for the other schools to arrive, and since he didn't particularly care about the individual aspect of the tournament, he didn't really pay attention. Instead he tried to find the Durmstrang quidditch players this time, assuming they would be sitting near Krum. Unfortunately, the only people sitting near Krum were Draco and his cohorts.

Harry missed the lighting of the Goblet of Fire, mostly because he simply wasn't paying attention. Really, all he remembered about the speech was that one of the French girls laughed during it.

Harry was thrilled when the food finally appeared. He took a large helping of chicken, mashed potatoes, and peas. He heard Hermione and a few others comment on the appearance of some foreign food. That intrigued Harry, but he was too busy devouring his meal to particularly care. Harry ate in silence, thinking about his upcoming Transfiguration paper, while he listened in to some of his fellow Gryffindor conversations.

A moment later Harry heard a voice from over his shoulder.

"Excusez-moi. Are you wanting ze bouillabaisse?" the voice asked. Harry turned over his shoulder to ask which of the dishes the bouillabaisse was so he could pass it to her.

Of course, what he saw knocked any words out of him. The French girl had very long silvery-blond hair and very large blue eyes. She

smiled fully with very even white teeth, and she was looking directly at Harry. She made a gesture toward what Harry could only assume was the bouillabaisse and looked like she was awaiting a reply.

Harry was glad he wasn't the only one speechless, too. He noticed Ron looked purple, and his mouth was wide open and filled with half-chewed food. That was the only sight it took for Harry to snap out of his momentary daze.

"Yea, here," he said quickly, pushing it toward the blonde.

"You 'ave finished wiz it?" she asked, smiling at Harry.

"Yea, it was delicious," Ron said, a little too loudly. The girl smiled diplomatically at Ron and picked up the dish. She walked slowly back toward the Ravenclaw table, turning a few heads on the short walk.

Harry watched her plop down between Lilly and Cho at the Ravenclaw table as Ron muttered something about veela, only to be chastised by Hermione. The girl said something to Lilly, who laughed quietly as she looked at the bouillabaisse. Harry did a quick double take as the beautiful French girl continued to talk to Lilly. The blonde turned and looked at him. When she saw he was looking she smiled and went back to her food. Harry blushed and looked away. At least he knew what he'd like to curl up with tonight.

The next day started like just about any other that term. Harry arose far too early for the weekend and met Cormac and Ginny in the common room.

"Where are the twins?" he asked.

"Not coming his morning," Ginny said. "They're finishing up their aging potion and going to try to enter the tournament. Told me they'd be there for practice."

"Okay. Three times around the lake?" Harry asked as they walked out of the common room.

"Should probably make it four," Cormac responded. "I know I need to burn off the feast."

"Me too," Ginny laughed. They walked down to the entrance. Harry didn't even spare the Goblet of Fire a second look as they stepped outside. After some quick stretches by the door they started their morning Jog around the lake. Davies and Fleet were already out and running.

They ran their four laps in close to the same amount of time it had taken them to run two when they first started. It was just a short walk from the edge of the lake back to the pitch and into their locker room.

When they entered the locker room Roger called Harry over as Cormac and Ginny ducked into their respective showers.

"Check out this play, Harry," Roger said handing him a diagram of a play. It was a daring offensive play where the beaters literally cleared the way right to the hoops for the chasers. Harry admired it and offered a pointer on where the beaters should go.

"And you know," Harry said, "I could shoot along above or below the actually play and create a distraction. Could call the play at a point where I'd be heading that way and it may be even more effective.

"Oh. Good idea, a couple seconds distraction could make it even easier. We'd have practically a six on oh if pulled off right," Davies laughed. "I love it."

"If they break it up though it's a clean breakaway at our own hoops," Harry commented.

"I know," Fleet said from behind Davies. "I designed it. High risk high reward."

"Well, let's practice it today and see how it works," Harry smiled. Davies nodded and agreed. Harry excused himself and went to take a quick shower before changing into his practice uniform.

"Any luck?" He heard Davies ask as he stepped back into the locker room proper.

"No. We grew these ridiculous beards and had to have Pomfrey get rid of them," George admitted.

"That's a shame. We're going to hit the pitch. Join us when you're ready," Davies said, picking up his Lotus and walking out to the pitch.

They had an easy practice that day. Hooch only stopped by briefly, as she was showing the separate visitors facilities to the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang teams, so Davies ran the majority of it. Harry and Cho spent the first part of it practicing various feints and seeker diversionary tactics. For the second half Davies wanted to run a quick scrimmage, so Harry paired with Titus and joined Roger, Alicia and Lilly with McLaggen in the hoops, against the Weasley twins and a line of Ginny, Malcolm Preece, and Cho with Herbet playing keeper.

The scrimmage went fairly well. Harry knew he was an awful beater so he concentrated on trapping the bludger and passing it to Titus, who was incredibly accurate with his shots. They played first to two hundred. Harry's side won, but only by a few goals.

After the match they went back into the locker room and changed. They resumed their usual routine of lounging around, waiting for the champions announcement at the evening feast.

The conversations quickly shifted to who they would like to have represent the school in the individual competition. Answers varied, but the consensus eventually came down to Cedric Diggory. The Gryffindor's had lobbied heavily for Angelina Johnson, but the rest of the team members just didn't see it.

Ten minutes before dinner they left the locker room and headed back to the Great Hall. The team split up upon entering and sat at their respective tables. Harry watched as Lilly sat next to the gorgeous blonde girl. He had meant to ask her if that was Fleur during practice, but they hadn't talked much, and he didn't want to do it in front of the rest of the team.

Harry sat between Ron and Hermione again. He picked up a glass of pumpkin juice and took a large drink.

"Who all put their name in?" Harry asked, looking around the Great Hall, trying to determine who looked too excited about the coming prospect of being a school champion. Harry would much rather be an alternate quidditch captain.

"Just about every seventh year," Hermione said. "And quite a few of the sixth years that were old enough. The goblet is certainly going to have some choices to make."

"Who are you pulling for?" Harry asked.

"Angelina Johnson, duh," Ron said. "Gryffindor or bust."

"Cool. Best of luck to her. Crouch and Bagman are still here?" Harry asked as the food appeared on the tables. He noticed the random foreign dishes still showed up. He debated trying one, but after a chilly day of flying, the hearty beef stew looked far too inviting.

"Yes, just for the champion selection. Then I imagine they'll return for each of the tasks," Hermione commented.

After the meal Dumbledore rose and walked up to the podium next to the Goblet of Fire. He made a sweeping gesture to the goblet and started to speak.

"Ladies and Gentleman, it appears that the Goblet is ready to make its decision on who will compete in a quest for eternal glory. I congratulate the Champions in advance. If you have the honor of having your name called, please step into the waiting room down the hallway behind me. Now it appears the Goblet is ready!" Dumbledore shouted dramatically. The flames on the goblet jumped around and after a brief moment a piece of parchment shot out of it. Dumbledore caught it expertly and read it, before gazing around the Great Hall.

"The champion from Beauxbatons is," he paused for a moment as a large portion of the Beauxbatons contingent leaned toward the podium. "Fleur Delacour!" Applause followed the selection. Harry's eyes scanned the Ravenclaw table. Many of the Beauxbaton's students looked rather dejected. The beautiful blonde next to Lilly looked pleasantly surprised. She stood and walked up to Dumbledore and disappeared down into the waiting room beyond him.

"Wow," Harry muttered softly. He heard Hermione laugh next to him.

"Prettier than you expected, Harry?" Hermione teased. Harry laughed and shook his head a little bit.

"I don't know what I expected," Harry admitted. "Can you believe that, Ron?" Harry looked at his best friend, who said nothing, but was flushed red and glaring at him. He looked like he was going to speak, but Dumbledore spoke before him, as the goblet shot yet another pieces of parchment into the air, which the old headmaster caught.

"The champion from Durmstrang is," he paused again, "Viktor Krum!" The cheer was much louder for Krum than Fleur. Harry saw Malfoy patting Krum on the back and screaming.

"Damn it," he muttered, clapping politely for the famous seeker.

"Harry, language!" Hermione scolded. "But why are you upset about that?"

"I wanted to fly against him," Harry admitted. "He may blow off the Quidditch now that he's the individual champion."

"Oh it's just a sport Harry!" Hermione scoffed.

"It's not 'just a sport' Hermione. Right Ron?" Harry was looking for support from his best friend. Instead all he got was a dejected muttering.

"Oh yea, Harry Potter worried about not getting to fly against Viktor Krum. Too bad you don't get everything."

"You know what, Ron-" Harry started, he was about to lay into his friend when Dumbledore interrupted.

"And our final champion. The Champion from Hogwarts!" Dumbledore caught the next bit of parchment. "Is none other than Cedric Diggory!" The applause for the home champion was deafening.

"Oh come on! Not the pretty boy!" Ron exclaimed, but Harry was pretty sure he was the only one that could hear. Ron ladled more food onto his plate and ate through the applause. Harry didn't have the heart to lay into him after that. Harry went back to eating as well before Dumbledore finished his speech.

"Yes, congratulations to all of the champions. I look forward to seeing them represent their school. Remember now that the best we can do for the three champions is to provide support and encouragement. Any direct interference into the tasks will result in severe reprimands to the student, and likely the champion as well. I trust that in the spirit of competition, this will not need to be enforced." Dumbledore continued with a similar message. Harry overheard Ron talking again.

"Damn Diggory. And Harry complaining about not getting his way. They get everything." Harry turned to see his friend stabbing a roasted potato angrily. He pressed his jaw together. Harry assumed Ron didn't realize he was talking aloud. But he didn't care.

"Ron, just shut up. Diggory deserved it. He's one of the hardest working people in the school. Yes, I'm upset that I may not get to fly against Krum, but he'd have probably beaten me anyway. And frankly, we aren't 'given' this. I work hard at seeking. Much harder than I've ever seen you work at keeping. Diggory is one of the best students. His work ethic is legendary, even for a Hufflepuff. Everyone involved in the Quidditch team works hard to be on the team. None of us were given anything. Maybe if you did more than bitched-

"Harry Potter?" Harry heard his name and looked around. He half expected it was Hermione chastising him about practically yelling at his friend. He saw Dumbledore looking at a new piece of parchment in his hand. He looked at it again and read once more. "Harry Potter." The Great Hall went silent. Harry stood slowly, not knowing what else to do, and walked up toward the podium. Dumbledore looked at him curiously and gestured for him to walk down into the waiting room.

Fleur stood by the fire in the small, dark room. Cedric and Krum each stood in opposite corners, looking at her. She ignored them. She turned and looked at him when he entered.

"Arry!" She smiled fully at him. Krum and Diggory turned and looked at him. Harry thought they looked jealous. "Do zey want us back?" Harry looked at her and didn't know what to say.

"Fleur," he started, thinking that worked well enough. "I. Erm. I don't know," he said weakly. She tossed her hair to the side.

"Zen why are you here?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," Harry admitted. He heard Krum mutter something in a foreign language, it didn't sound nice and drew a glare from Fleur. Diggory looked like he was about to say something when they heard footsteps in the hallway. Ludo Bagman burst in, followed by loud argumentative noises, and the other tournament officials.

"What's going on?" Cedric asked. Bagman waved him away and looked directly at Harry.

"Remarkable. Truly remarkable. May I present to you three, the fourth Triwizard Champion," Bagman made a sweeping gesture to him as he spoke. Harry gulped a little bit. He didn't want to compete, surely there had to be a way around this. He hoped he could talk his way out of it.

He turned to face the other champions. His gaze was met by three cold, furious, stares.

Author's Note: This chapter originally checked in at 14,000 words. My goal per chapter is 6-9k, so I cut it down to around 9 even. In doing so took out a bit of Ron being less of a prat. Upon editing I noticed he seems to be angry the entire chapter. That wasn't really the case the first time, but I guess it works for now. The chapter also originally ended after the upcoming scene, but I figured I'll just use that to start the next chapter instead. It ended up a bit quidditch heavy, but I assure you it was even more so in the first draft.

Also, I was going to come up with better names for the brooms, but everything I could think of wound up seeming like a cliched bird names. Then I figured there hasn't been a blatantly obvious F1 reference in at least three chapters, so in honor of the car launches, or something like that. Of course, in 1994-5 I'm pretty sure Lotus was the only actual team, and Renault and Mercedes just supplied engines. Oh well, details. On a completely unrelated side note, the two new lotus-renaults look pretty nice...

Erm. yea. Next time we have the first direct action of Harry and Fleur.

I've also realized that I hate editing my own work. I went over this chapter twice, and have decided I need to look a little bit into getting a beta...

Thanks for reading and all the reviews, I appreciate every last one.

Chapter 7

Reactions

"There must be a mistake. 'E cannot compete! 'E is too young." Fleur was the first to recover, she looked over at Harry. Her expression was the first to soften.

"Oh there is no mistake, Miss Delacour. His name came out of the Goblet of Fire, and as such he is bound to compete in the tournament," Bagman explained, grinning from ear to ear as he did.

"But how did my name get into the goblet? I didn't put it in!" Harry exclaimed.

"We'll figure that out later," Bagman said. Fleur looked back as Madame Maxime and the other heads continued to argue.

"Madame Maxime!" she said, "Zey are saying zat 'Arry is to compete as well!"

"What? Dumbly-dorr? Zat is most unjust." Madame Maxime glared at the Hogwarts headmaster. "'Ogwarts cannot 'ave two champions!"

"Didn't you put an age line around the goblet?" Karkaroff said dryly.

"Yes, and it worked well. Every other underage student grew a very long beard, as some of your students discovered," Dumbledore said calmly.

"Are you insinuating something about our institutions, Dumbledore? It seems just as many of yours were caught cheating. And apparently one of them was successful," Karkaroff retorted.

"I'm not insinuating anything, Igor. Has anyone simply tried asking poor Harry?"

"Poor Harry?" Viktor Krum retorted. "He's getting the chance of a lifetime!" Dumbledore ignored the quidditch star.

"Did you put your name into the Goblet of Fire, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, looking him square in the eye.

"No," Harry said quickly.

"Did you ask, or pay, one of the older students to do it for you?"

"No," his reply was more forceful.

"Well I am convinced that Harry did not wish this on himself," Dumbledore calmly stated.

"Obviously 'e is lying!" Madame Maxime shouted.

"Madame," Fleur interjected.

"Not now, Fleur," Madame Maxime cut her off before she could make a point.

"I would have to agree, Dumbledore. You can't simply take the boy at his word like that."

"The foreigners do have a point, headmaster," Snape spoke slowly. "Potter does have a penchant for rule breaking rivaled only by his father and the outlaw Sirius Black."

"You see, Dumbledore, even your own professors doubt the boys veracity," Karkaroff stated.

"That's not true," Professor McGonagall interrupted. Harry was surprisingly grateful she came to his defense. He wondered if she believed him, or if she simply trusted Dumbledore's judgment.

"Hardly, the boy has stepped far out of every year here, Minerva. First he wandered, knowingly, into restricted areas of the castle. Second he defies a specific order to not leave the safety of the common rooms. Third he knowingly consorts with a werewolf and winds up well off of school grounds after hours," Snape chronicled everything with a sneer. Karkaroff and Maxime looked horrified.

Harry felt the anger swelling up inside of him. He made a note to thank Ron. If he hadn't been so irritated with his friend earlier, he probably wouldn't have had the anger to channel into his next statement.

"Well, you weren't doing much about the basilisk, Professor Snape. I figured someone should take care of it," he snapped.

"A basilisk?" Krum laughed. "I doubt the boy has ever even seen one."

"You expect us to believe a tropical serpent was in the school?" Karkaroff laughed with his student.

"And 'e lies more right in front of you!" Madame Maxime stated. Harry looked over at Cedric, who seemed to be contemplating things. No doubt he was thinking back to his fifth year, and the petrified students.

"But surely 'e shouldn't compete. 'E is too young. 'E cannot be skilled enough," Fleur said from her spot in front of the fire place. Harry looked at her. He felt hurt. She didn't think he was capable.

"It doesn't matter, Miss Delacour," Bagman said from the opposite side of the room. Harry looked at the former quidditch player. He thought Bagman appeared to be sizing him up, like he was some type of race horse.

"Ow can zat not matter?" Fleur's eyes narrowed as she focused on Ludo Bagman. But it was Barty Crouch who spoke.

"Because the Goblet of Fire constitutes a binding magical contract. I believe your father is an attorney, Miss Delacour, you should understand what that entails." Fleur's eyes narrowed even more as her gaze shifted over to the other ministry official.

"What happens if I don't compete?" Harry asked.

"You lose your magic," Fleur said simply.

"Yes," Crouch responded. "The magic of the goblet bound your own personal magic to it. Failure to attempt the tasks with result in the loss of your magical ability."

"Great," Harry responded. "Why would someone enter me in this?"

"You 'ave failed to convince me you did not enter yourself," Madame Maxime said.

"Frankly, I don't care if he entered himself or not. Either way it is obvious that Hogwarts is cheating. Whether it is a single renegade student or an entire institutional plot is irrelevant," Karkaroff said.

"That is an outrageous accusation," McGonagall said.

"You've done nothing to counter it. After all, as the boy said, why would an outside source want him in the tournament?" Karkaroff sneered at McGonagall. Harry half expected the transfiguration professor to curse him.

"That doesn't seem like that hard of a question to answer, Igor," Professor Moody spoke from the doorway. Harry wasn't sure how long the defense professor had been there. He was slightly disturbed by the fact that the defense professor could sneak up on anyone.

"Oh? Enlighten us, Mad-Eye," Snape said.

"People die in these tournaments, Severus. They were canceled because three consecutive ones ended with none of the champions surviving. The last time none even made it past the first task. And correct me if I'm wrong, but we all know who would want Mr. Potter dead," Harry noticed that Moody looked at Snape when he spoke, but his electric blue eye focused on Karkaroff. Harry saw Fleur and Cedric both paled at that revelation about previous champions. At least they'd brought it upon themselves. Krum seemed unconcerned.

"I doubt that he-who-must-not-be-named put Harry Potter's name into the Goblet of Fire," Karkaroff said dryly. "If he was even still alive, and possessed the ability to do so, I think we'd all have more pressing matters to worry about than the tournament."

"He has followers," Moody retorted. "But you would already know that, wouldn't you, Igor."

"Had followers, Moody. And I'm not going to stand here and be accused by a mad man."

"They seemed pretty active at the World Cup," Moody accused. "You were there, weren't you? Watching your star pupil?"

"Alastor, enough," Dumbledore said quietly. Moody looked at the Hogwarts headmaster. "We do not need this to descend into petty squabbling."

"It is already there," Fleur said quietly from the corner. Everyone in the room looked at her. She had turned back to the fire.

"Miss Delacour remember your manners!" Madame Maxime scolded. Fleur just laughed haughtily.

"Moi? I am not the one accusing an innocent boy, whom you know nothing about, of cheating. Zis 'Arry 'as done nothing so far. Maybe 'e really doesn't want to compete!" Fleur looked very tense in the corner. Harry wanted to go and hug her. He figured that would be incredibly bad manners, though.

"Oh please. 'E probably dreams about competing," Madame Maxime chided her student once more.

"But zat does not matter!" Fleur said exasperatedly. "'E is bound to compete like ze rest of us! Zair is nothing zat we can do. So let us move on and be done with it!"

"Well said, Miss Delacour," Bagman said. Harry didn't quite think the matter should be dropped that easily. But of course, he had a little more at stake than Fleur.

"The girl has a point," Moody said. "We should simply move on. We can look into Potter's matter more closely later. But, as she says, there is nothing that we can do about it. Tell them about their first challenge so we can all get to bed and ruminate on the day." Harry thought that Moody was pretty quick to dismiss the matter for a madman obsessed with dark wizards. And he had really laid into Karkaroff.

"Right. Well. You do not get to know about the first task," Bagman said to the four champions.

"Well that's useful," Cedric commented. Bagman looked slightly put out at being interrupted, but continued anyway.

"The task is designed to make you face the unknown. Courage in the face of the unknown is an important quality required of the

champions. You will face the task with nothing more than your wand, on the twenty-fourth of November. The champions will be prohibited from asking for help.

"Also, champions are exempt from end-of-the year examinations. As part of that you four are also not required to attend classes. However we strongly advise that you do so. Learning more never hurt. Best of luck to you all." Bagman bowed slightly to the champions as he finished speaking. Harry had a feeling that rule was devised with the assumption that an underage student would not have wound up in the tournament.

Harry idly wondered about all of the times he foolishly rushed into the unknown. Nothing they presented to him could be harder than that, could it? Of course, he'd always had help. Harry didn't really pay attention to the conversation between Crouch, Bagman and Dumbledore as he thought about the future tasks. Instead he took the time to inch closer to Fleur.

"Hey," he said quietly when he felt he was within whispering range of the French girl. She didn't turn to look at him. "Thanks for sticking up for me there."

"I did not 'stick up for you' 'Arry." She responded coldly. "Zey would 'ave argued all night if someone 'ad not spoken up."

"Well, still. Thank you," he whispered. "I really didn't put my name in the goblet."

"So you said. You know, some of your classmates do not speak very highly of you. Zey say you often seek attention."

"Who said that?" Harry asked.

"I do not know. I overheard it at lunch."

"So you'll formulate an opinion based on heresy?"

"Non. But I overheard students in each of ze 'ouses with similar opinions."

"I already told you once, Fleur. I don't want any of this. It just sort of happens. And now I have to compete in some tournament I was

looking forward to watching from the stands with my friends." His words came out angrier than he would have liked. Fleur tensed, but did not get the chance to respond as Madame Maxime's voice cut through the room.

"We are leaving now, Miss Delacour," the large headmistress said. Fleur just nodded and walked next to the woman as the two left. Harry noticed Karkaroff and Krum had already left, leaving just the Hogwarts contingent behind.

"Professor Dumbledore?" Harry asked, "Is there anything I can do to prove that I didn't put my name into the goblet?" The headmaster looked caught off guard at being so directly addressed and questioned.

"I do not know, Harry. I will discuss the matter more with the other judges when we next meet. For now, I would not worry about it. Instead try to focus on the tasks ahead. I would suggest a good night of sleep." The aged headmaster looked at him, with the familiar twinkle in his eye. Harry didn't really like that answer, but he could sense there was nothing he could do about it now.

The headmaster left the room then, followed shortly by the remaining professors. Harry looked over at Cedric, who eyed him carefully.

"Well, shall we?" Harry asked, gesturing toward the door.

"Sure," the Hufflepuff said. They walked into the empty hallway together. "Slytherin's monster was really a basilisk?"

"Yes."

"Unbelievable," Cedric said, almost in awe. "The signs were all there, but I would have never guessed. It's lucky that no one died."

"Very," Harry responded, not really interested in talking about that. He had the strangest feeling he was going to become as much of an exile this year, as when everyone thought he was the heir of Slytherin.

"And you fought it?" Cedric asked.

"I did," Harry said curtly. "With the help of Fawkes and a sword now on display in Dumbledore's office.

"I saw that sword at a prefects meeting last year," Cedric paused for a moment. "You should have kept that one." Harry couldn't help but laugh.

"The thought hadn't even occurred to me. It may have come in handy now."

"Well if we wind up having to fight a basilisk, Harry, don't be surprised if I summon you to me and defer to your expertise," Cedric joked. Harry laughed a little bit more.

"I wonder if that would constitute asking for help?" he asked.

"Only one way to find out," Cedric responded, drawing another laugh from both of them. They reached the point of the castle where they had to split apart to head to their own respective common rooms.

"Well, I'm heading up," Harry said, moving toward the stairs hoping they wouldn't shift out of the way as he walked up.

"And I'm down to the right. But Harry, before you go, how did you manage to get your name into the goblet?"

"I was telling the truth, Cedric. I didn't enter myself, and I didn't ask anyone to enter me."

"Oh. Well, good night, Harry," the Hufflepuff said, sounding slightly disappointed. Harry knew Cedric didn't believe him. He knew there had to be some way of convincing the students, but what it was escaped him.

"You too, Cedric. Good luck with this thing," Harry responded before walking up the stairs that led to the Gryffindor common room.

Harry hesitated outside of the common room for just a moment. He wondered what his housemates would think. Would they just assume he was a cheater as well?

He gave the fat lady the password and stepped into the common room. Fred and George were the first to meet him. They clapped him on the back, cheering loudly.

"How did you do it?" George asked.

"Yea, and no beard!" Fred commented.

"At least it's a Gryffindor," Angelina Johnson said from behind the twins. She had a polite smile on her face.

Someone passed him a bunch of food, but he wasn't hungry so he dropped it onto a nearby table. Lee Jordan tried to wrap a banner around him like a cape. He tried to avoid that but failed. The questions kept coming. No one even really seemed to care about his answers, or even listened when he tried to give them. Eventually, after about half an hour of Gryffindor's celebrating him, they started to calm.

"So how did you do it?" George asked once more. Harry was about to give the standard answer he'd been giving all night when someone else spoke up.

"He didn't," Ginny said from a back corner where she finished up a homework assignment.

"Yes, he's said that, but I don't believe him. No offense, Harry." George said to his sister.

"Well you should," she responded.

"And why is that?"

"Because he was with us the entire day. I met him in the common room as he left his dorm, looking like he should still be asleep. Then he went for a run with me and Cormac. And then he practiced with the team for the rest of the day. We all returned to the feast together. He didn't have any time to put his name in the Goblet," Ginny explained.

"Well he could have come back up to the common room to meet you," Fred commented.

"He could have, but trust me, he looked like he had pretty much just rolled out of bed," Ginny stated.

"Thanks Ginny," Harry said.

"No problem. Did they figure out how your name came out of the Goblet?" she asked.

"No. Moody was the only one who even had a theory. He thinks someone entered me in the hopes that I would die during it," Harry said calmly. The common room went unnaturally quiet. Harry suddenly felt rather like the elephant in the room.

"Well," he said dumbly. "On that note, I'm going to bed. I'll see at practice tomorrow," he gestured to Ginny and the twins. He'd have gestured to Cormac and Alicia too, but he didn't see them.

He wondered if Ron and Hermione would believe him. He was happy that Ginny, at the very least, believed him. He pondered where exactly Ron and Hermione were, he hadn't seen them since the feast. He'd completely forgotten that the last thing he'd said to Ron was that he complained too much.

He entered the fourth year boy's dormitory and gazed around. Only he and Ron occupied the room. Harry smiled a bit at his friend.

"Hey Ron," he said quietly. Ron just looked up at him.

"Oh, come to yell at me some more?" Ron asked.

"No. Look, mate, I'm sorry about that," Harry said. "I've just been frustrated of late and I shouldn't have lashed out."

"You've been frustrated?" Ron laughed. "I'm sorry you're so frustrated that you now get to be a school champion. How'd you do it, anyway, the cloak? You could have at least let some others in too, or did you not want the competition."

"Come on, Ron. You know me better than that. I didn't want the competition at all, I didn't want to compete."

"Yes well, you should have told me how you did it then. I could have entered!" Ron said, sounding a mix between excited and hurt.

"But I didn't enter myself!" Harry argued.

"Sure. Why else would your name come up?" Ron asked, for the first time in the conversation sounding level-headed.

"I don't know. Moody thinks whoever it is probably is hoping that I die during the tasks." Harry admitted for the second time in a few minutes.

"Oh please," Ron almost laughed. "Moody isn't all there and you know it. And you can't use that excuse every year."

"What?" Harry asked, sounding confused.

"First it's Snape wanting to kill you and steal the stone. Next it's the Heir of Slytherin wanting to kill you. Sorry if you don't remember, but it was my sister that he wanted to kill. Next Sirius Black wants you dead. Low and behold he winds up being your Godfather! Who's it going to be next year? Merlin back from the dead to smite Harry Potter? It gets old mate."

"You can't be serious, Ron. Quirrell tried to kill me. Your sister saw the basilisk. It almost killed our best friend! Damn it man. I didn't want to be in this tournament. I don't want this. Why can't you believe that?" Harry pleaded. His blood was beginning to boil in his veins. Almost every part of him wanted to punch his best friend.

"How unlucky for you, Champion. Oh you don't want to compete, but now you have to. How terrible is that. And here I thought you were my friend. But no, I'm not even worthy of knowing how you tricked the goblet," Ron spat. Harry blinked and felt like his chest was being crushed.

"You're my best friend, Ron. I didn't enter the tournament. I don't want to compete. Please, believe me," Harry begged. Ron just turned away and pulled the curtains back on his bed. Harry stood in the middle of the dorm, unable to believe his friend's reaction. He couldn't think of anything else to do other than crawl into his bed and hope that the entire day had simply been a dream.

Unfortunately when he awoke the next morning he quickly realized it wasn't a dream. He also realized he was likely late for his morning

run. He groaned and quite literally rolled out of bed, before pulling himself up and heading down to the common room. It was still empty, which was probably a good sign.

He hurried downstairs toward the Great Hall. He peered inside, but didn't see any of his Quidditch teammates, so he nicked a few pieces of toast from the nearest table and hurried outside.

Thankfully, most of his teammates were still running around the lake, so he figured he could at least do a quick warm-up before joining them for practice. He started on his run. After his first lap around the lake, Roger caught up with him.

"So you're staying on the team?" Roger asked. Harry looked at the older boy.

"Of course," he said. "Why would I not?"

"Well, with the individual tournament, Hooch figured you were going to want to focus on that."

"I don't even want to be in that, much less focus on that. I'd much rather compete with the team I earned a spot on," Harry said.

"And that's why I picked you as an alternate," Davies said.

"What?" Harry asked. "I thought Hooch picked those."

"No. She picked me as Captain, and I picked the two alternates. She figured I'd have wanted someone older for the second. But I went with you on the hunch that you'd really throw yourself into it. And you have," Davies explained. Harry felt incredibly flattered.

"Thanks, Roger," Harry said.

"No, Harry. Thank you. No offense to Cho, but you're a considerably better seeker than she is."

"She's getting better. We all are."

"Yes, she is. And Ravenclaw should put up a significant challenge next year in the house cup. But you're getting better too, and with

the way the Gryff's are playing, it could get ugly. I'm just sad I won't be here to see it."

"Well, we'll just have to win the complete tournament for you, then," Harry said.

"If only it were that easy," Roger laughed. After a few moments pause, as they were nearing the end of the lap, he continued. "I hate to ask this, Harry, but curiosity is getting the better of me. How did you manage to get your name into the goblet?"

"If I knew I'd tell you," Harry said. "I didn't put it in myself, and I didn't ask anyone to do it for me. Although if that worked, you'd think more people would have done it."

"Somehow I knew that. You were with the team all day. I thought maybe in the morning, but that just felt wrong. You know no one is going to believe you, right?"

"What else is new?" Harry asked, getting another laugh out of the captain.

"You have a point there. You'd think after four years someone would give you the benefit of the doubt. As long as you keep practicing as hard as you have been, I don't care whether or not you're in the individual tournament. Just don't get yourself killed. We need you." Roger joked.

"I'll do my best," Harry couldn't help but smile.

"Good. I'd expect nothing less," Davies said.

"So what did you tell the team?" Harry asked.

"Nothing yet. I figured I should talk to you first. If you're going to play, then there really isn't any point in telling them anything. Unless you disagree. I say just continuing with practice as normal would be the best course of action." Roger explained.

"I have no problem with that," Harry said. He slowed his pace and started to walk toward the locker room.

"Good. I'm going to do another lap, looks like Alicia and Cho need some incentive to move a little bit faster. I'll see you on the pitch, Harry," Davies said and ran off after the two girls.

A few hours later Harry found himself floating high above the pitch eating a sandwich. A few of his teammates had gone back to the locker room to eat, but Harry had decided to stay out. It was warm enough for the time of year and he enjoyed having the sun beat down on his back.

"Whatcha doing up there?" he heard someone ask from below him. He glanced by to see a large yellow six on the back of the white uniform flying away. Braided brown hair cut down the middle of the number. She circled back and flew up to meet him, hovering on her Lotus next to him.

"Eating lunch," Harry said.

"I noticed that," Lilly said. She was tossing a quaffle up and down as she floated next to him.

"And what are you doing?" Harry asked as he finished his sandwich.

"Well I was going to work on some one-on-one moves before we did some breakaway and shootout drills, but I didn't feel like chasing after the quaffle so I decided to come and bother you."

"Nice of you."

"I thought so too," Lilly lay back on her broom and looked up at the sky. "So, you had your first meeting with Fleur last night, didn't you?" Harry looked over at her like that, knowing his response would be judged and not wanting to respond incorrectly.

"Yes, I did." Was all he decided to say.

"Well how did that go!" Lilly asked.

"You're her friend, aren't you? Ask her."

"That well, eh? Was it her aura?" Lilly asked.

"Her aura?"

"Yes, she has an aura, well more of a slight pull. She's a quarter Veela," Lilly explained. "You stumble over words and fail at talking to her? That tends to happen."

"Oh, no. I was fine. She just seemed to believe that I'm a liar. As she'd heard that from other students. Doubt that I really didn't want to compete. You know, same as everyone else." Harry said.

"She didn't say that!" Lilly exclaimed, looking slightly perturbed.

"Not quite directly, but more or less."

"She's usually more open than that," Lilly said, with a slight frown. "She rather enjoyed your letters, too. It was all she'd talk about when she was in Florence."

"Well she reacted as to be expected. Probably thinks I'm trying to steal her school's glory or something. I'll settle for beating the snot out of them at quidditch." Harry commented.

"Well, you'll get your chance there. Looks like they're getting ready for the drills," Lilly was looking down. Harry did the same and saw the rest of the team walking back out onto the pitch.

"You said Roger wanted to do one-on-one breakaways?" Harry asked.

"Yea. He figured we'd end the day with that and see what Hooch wanted to do tomorrow," she explained.

"Well that works. I suppose Cho, the beaters, and I get to play fetch?" Harry asked.

"That's probably a good guess," Lilly laughed. Harry just shook his head, fighting back a smile, and flew down toward the rest of the team.

He abused his privileges as an alternate captain and made Fred and George take one set of hoops, while Cho and Titus took the other. He mostly circled the pitch with Roger, taking mental notes on how everyone performed just in case he was required to pick the lineup for a shoot out. Of course, for that to happen both Roger and Lilly

would have to be otherwise incapacitated for the decision to fall up to him. And frankly, if that was the case, he wouldn't really have that many shooters left to pick from.

Harry watched Herbert Fleet stop a shot from Alicia before turning his Lotus to the other set of hoops where he saw Malcolm Preece score on Cormac.

"Who's that?" Roger asked, catching a return quaffle from one of the beaters before tossing it to Ginny, who raced on toward Herbert.

"Don't know," Harry said, looking toward the ground where someone approached the pitch. "I'll go check it out." He swooped toward the ground landing next to Colin Creevy.

"There you are, Harry!" Colin said. "The people from the prophet, and I think some other foreign papers, want to interview the champions! You're supposed to be there!" Harry thought the boy sounded too excited. Harry just groaned.

"Fine. Let me go tell Roger and then change. I'll meet you out here in a few minutes," Harry said.

He delayed it as long as he could, but even with changing as slowly as he possibly could, and walking at a pace that would make a snail blush, he found himself in front of a group of reporters a mere twenty-five minutes later.

It only took him a few minutes to realize how bad of an idea that was. It seemed all of the reporters had finished with the other three champions. Immediately after his wand was declared to be in proper working order, the reporters descended upon him.

"How did you get into the tournament?"

"Are you looking forward to competing?"

"What do you think your parent's would think?"

"Will it interfere with your quidditch?"

"Are you going to try to go professional if you have a good showing in the tournament?"

"Do you feel your age will be a severe detriment for the tasks ahead?"

Harry didn't even know how, or where, to respond. He stared at the reporters and felt incredibly confused. They just kept asking questions, not even seeming bothered that he didn't say anything. After a few more moments he felt a comforting touch on his shoulder. He looked up to see Professor Dumbledore standing next to him. The aged headmaster spoke.

"Please. Young Harry has never been interviewed before, and we are running out of time. I believe we can manage five questions. Please keep them limited to matters of the tournament, and do remember that unlike the other champions, he is a minor," Dumbledore stated. When he finished the reporters hands all shot into the air. They reminded Harry a little bit of Hermione. He did his best imitation of an athlete giving a press conference when he pointed to the first, a blonde witch in the middle.

"Rita Skeeter, a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance, Harry. Now, you must answer the question we're all dying to know. How did you manage to trick the legendary Albus Dumbledore's age line and enter yourself into the tournament?"

"I didn't," Harry said dumbly. None of the reporters looked happy with that. But Dumbledore spoke before any of them got the chance to comment.

"We do not believe Harry entered his name into the Goblet of Fire. Why it came out is currently being investigated."

"So you don't believe what Maxime and Karkaroff are saying about the boy's honesty and that his is a plot to give the advantage to Hogwarts?" A reporter asked from the corner of the gaggle.

"Do you really want to waste one of your questions for Harry on that?" Dumbledore asked. The reporter immediately backed down. After a moment Harry gestured to a man standing to the left of Rita.

"Do you feel that you'll be at a disadvantage because of your age?"

"Well, yes. Everyone else has three more years of experience on me. I'm sure they know more magic than I do," Harry answered honestly. He gestured to a female reporter.

"Two part question, if you don't mind. First, there have been many rumors that you often find yourself in precarious situations at school; could experiences from that help you in the tournament?"

"Well, probably, but I'm not sure how," Harry answered. As soon as he finished speaking the reporter continued.

"Okay, second, some Hogwarts Professors say you have a constant need for attention and this is merely you acting out. Care to comment on that?"

"Not really," Harry responded before realizing just how bad that sounded as an answer. "But I will say if I really wanted attention, I'd probably have done an interview sooner." He was pleased when the reporters laughed.

"Care to comment on the rumored precarious situations?" Another reporter asked. Again, Dumbledore answered before Harry could.

"Please limit questions to the tournament," the headmaster stated. "We have time for two more."

"Harry, we know you've made the Hogwarts Quidditch team. There has been some uproar from the broom companies that this tournament allowed for three first time manufacturers. And to make it worse, the manufacturers are mostly Muggle-borns in Muggle companies. What do you know of this and what do you think of the new Lotus LE1 you'll be flying in the tournament?" A reporter on the other side of Rita asked.

"Uhm. I don't really know much about the controversy. Really, all I knew of Lotus, Mercedes and Renault is that they manufacture Muggle vehicles. Usually expensive ones. And I think they all take part in forms of Muggle racing as well. As for the broom, it flies rather well. I have no complaints about it, and I think the team rather likes it as well. We all appreciate that the equipment in the tournament should be equal. It should make for better matches." Harry hoped that he gave a satisfactory answer.

While he did prefer his Firebolt, he had to admit the Lotus was growing on him. Still, he doubted he'd use it next year in the house tournament.

"Alright, last question, Harry," Rita chimed in. Some of the reporters around her glared at her. Harry got the strangest feeling that they didn't particularly like her. "How does it feel to be the representative of Hogwarts in this tournament?" Harry paused for a moment and looked at her.

"You'd have to ask Cedric. He's the Hogwarts champion. I'm actually pulling for him in this. He's a great competitor and I hope he does well. As for being a member of the Hogwarts quidditch team, that's a great honor and I hope I perform well." Harry looked up at Dumbledore then. The twinkle had returned to the headmaster's eye.

"Alright. That's enough for the day. You will all have chances to question the champions after each of the tasks. Dumbledore escorted the reporters out of the room and presumably to the entrance hall. Harry gazed around the room for the first time. He was left alone, the other champions all having left while he was answering questions.

He took his usual seat next to Hermione for the evening meal. She gave him a polite smile as he sat down and continued her conversation about runic translations with a sixth year next to her. Harry began eating.

"Hello Harry," Hermione said a few moments later, once she was happy with the runes conversation.

"Hey. Where's Ron?" Harry asked.

"I haven't seen him since lunch," Hermione admitted. "How was practice?"

"It was fine. We took it pretty easy today. I had to go and talk with reporters after about the tournament."

"How was that?" she asked.

"I don't know. It didn't seem too bad. I was late because of practice and Dumbledore limited their questions."

"And I suppose you won't know until it's reported, anyway. What kind of questions did they ask?"

"It all seemed pretty standard. How I got it, how I thought I'd do. Some quidditch stuff." Harry explained.

"Well it probably wasn't that bad," Hermione joked. "After all you boys do really love talking about your quidditch."

"Yea," Harry agreed. "Thanks, by the way."

"For what?" Hermione looked startled.

"For not asking."

"We've been through enough together, Harry." She said. "If you tell me you didn't enter your name, I believe you." She explained. They both heard Ron talking in the distance and looked over to see him enter the great hall, and take a seat down the table from them with Dean and Seamus.

"I wish someone else believed me," Harry said softly, looking down at his food.

"Oh Harry," Hermione sympathized. "I think he believes you. I mean, I can't see why he wouldn't. You've never been anything but honest with him. I just think he's insanely jealous of you," Hermione attempted to justify their friend's feelings.

"Yes, well. He can have the tournament if he wants it. I sure don't," Harry brooded. Hermione rolled her eyes and hit him playfully.

"Stop brooding. Tell me about Fleur." Hermione demanded.

"My gorgeous French pen pal who happens to be the Beauxbatons champion?" Harry teased.

"Yea, the blonde cow that everyone fawns over," Hermione attempted to tease, but Harry sensed a bit more vehemence there.

"She's part Veela. Her friend told me that. That's why they're fawning," Harry commented.

"You didn't seem bothered," she commented, then gasped and looked surprised. "Harry, are you..uhm...?" Harry got her meaning.

"What..No. I was enthralled at the World Cup. And I do think she's pretty. But she thinks I'm a cheater who's trying to give Hogwarts an advantage in the individual competition." Harry stated. Hermione frowned.

"You can't really catch a break this year, can you?" Hermione said quietly.

"Nah, the first few months were great," Harry laughed. He speared a piece of meat and brought it to his mouth while he looked around the hall. He looked at Ron for a moment and just shook his head. He knew his friend would come around, eventually, but he wished he had Ron's support.

Harry dove. He pressed himself faster and faster as his eyes focused on the little golden ball that skimmed just above the ground. He forced the Lotus to its very limits. He felt the wind resistance as he pushed it harder. He knew he was traveling at nearly two hundred kilometers an hour as the ground grew progressively closer. A year ago he didn't think he would be willing to try this maneuver.

The golden ball darted away from him as he grew closer to the ground. Harry reacted purely on instinct. He pulled his broom up quickly, maintaining almost his full speed as he raced after the snitch. He dodged a bludger with an easy roll, not even bothering to take his eyes off of the snitch, even for the moment he was upside down.

The snitch shot upwards and he followed it, gaining quickly. It reversed quickly and Harry corkscrewed sharply and followed, upside down coming out of his own reverse move. He didn't even notice as he sped up on the golden ball. It tried to cut right but Harry anticipated that and grabbed it right out of the air.

He quickly rolled his broom upright and saw that the mock game had stopped because everyone else on the pitch was staring at him. Roger flew over next to him and took the snitch.

"Wow, Harry, just wow. Please refrain from doing that again," the captain said.

"Doing what?" Harry asked.

"Trying to kill yourself in practice. We still have games to play. Cho thought you were fainting. She didn't even follow you into the dive. I wasn't even aware these brooms could change direction that fast."

"Neither was I," Harry commented. "Still, I'd have had it coming out of the dive on the Firebolt."

"If you insist, Harry," George said, flying up next to him.

"That flying was professional quality, Harry," Fred said, following his brother.

"Yes. Well, I think we're done for the day." Hooch said, flying up next to them. "Nice catch, Potter. Remember, our first game is in a month."

"Who do we play?" Roger asked.

"I can't tell you that until it's announced, Davies, you know that," Hooch said. Roger smiled charismatically at the old coach.

"Yes, but it's worth a try." The whole team laughed. Fred and George flew off to collect the bludgers as Malcolm tossed the quaffle to Hooch.

"Who's that?" the Hufflepuff chaser said as he peered at the ground below them. A figure clothed in blue was walking out toward the pitch, looking up at him.

"Looks like a Beauxbatons student come to spy on practice," Alicia said.

"Someone should go yell at him," Titus said, looking directly at Lilly.

"Indeed," Roger agreed, doing the same thing.

"Why are you all looking at me?" Lilly asked. "Is there something on my face?"

"You speak French," Titus said.

"So?" Lilly asked.

"So go yell at the French trespasser," Roger commented.

"They all speak English, you know!" Lilly said as she flew down to meet the approaching Beauxbatons student. The rest of the team flew down to the locker room to change.

Harry grabbed a sandwich upon entering, making a mental note to thank the elves for always having food in the locker room after practices. Harry was sure Fred and George had something to do with that, but he had yet to ask them.

He went and sat by his locker, pulling off his seeker gloves and boots. He tossed his socks into the laundry bin at the bottom of his locker, and watched as they simply vanished. They'd appear perfectly balled the next day, he knew. He had to admit, he could grow accustomed to being pampered.

He pulled on a fresh pair of socks and was about to pull off his uniform when Lilly entered and spoke.

"Harry, someone wants to speak with you outside," she said as she moved to her locker.

"Who?" Ginny asked, sounding slightly jealous.

"Just a friend of mine. She's harmless," Lilly answered. Harry put on his shoes, ignoring the fact he was still in his practice uniform and walked toward the exit. He couldn't help but notice Ginny watching him, with her arms crossed across her chest.

He stepped out into the night air and was glad for the heavier uniform. He realized then, that the actual game uniform was likely heavier than the practice uniforms because it would likely be cooler when they played the games.

He didn't see anyone waiting for him outside, so he started to walk toward the pitch itself, figuring whoever it was would wait in the

stands. He hadn't taken more than three steps when a voice spoke behind him.

"Potter," the quiet, feminine voice said. Harry didn't think it could be anything good if he was being addressed by his last name. His first assumption was that it was some Beauxbatons student intending to insult him for being an individual champion.

"Yes?" he asked without turning. His voice sounded harsh when he spoke, but he didn't care.

"Sept?" Is zat important for you?" He realized she was just reading the back of his jersey. He turned to look for her. Fleur Delacour sat stiffly on a nearby bench. She had her full uniform on, including hat. He could only assume her hair was up in a bun, hidden under the hat since he didn't see any of it. Her large, blue eyes were focused on him, and her hands were together in her lap. She looked as tense as she had before the fireplace a few days earlier.

"No. It's just the assigned number," he said, moving over toward her.

"Oh. 'Ow does zat work?" She asked.

"You don't really follow quidditch at all, do you?" he asked. She looked down and blushed and he cursed himself for not simply explaining it.

"Non. I told you I do not 'ave much interest in it," she admitted.

"Oh, the seeker on traditional teams is simply number seven. National teams use the system. Professional league players usually pick their number," Harry explained.

"I see. And what number will you pick when you are professional?" she asked.

"I've got a long way to go for that, Fleur. I'm not even sure I'm good enough, or if that's what I want to do," he said.

"Entertain me, 'Arry," she said.

"Honestly, I don't know," he replied. "I haven't really thought about it. Eleven, maybe?"

"Pourquoi?" she asked. "I mean, why?"

"Because I was eleven when I discovered the magical world. It changed my life, seems fitting," Harry said. He couldn't help but smile as he added, "And it was the first number that came into my head when you asked." She chuckled a little bit as well.

"Well zat is a good reason," she said.

"So did you ask me to come out here to discuss quidditch numbers?" Harry asked, trying to sound light as he spoke.

"Non. I did not. I 'ad a rather interesting visit from my friend ze other night. After one of your practices," she spoke slowly, wringing her hands together as she did. Harry leaned against the side of the stands, a few feet away from the bench where she sat.

"And?" he asked.

"Well, Lillian was rather adamant that I was being silly. And she informed me zat zair was no way you could 'ave entered your name. She said zat you were playing quidditch all day, and zat you never 'ad time to go to ze hall." She said, placing her hands down on the bench next to her.

"That's true," Harry said. "And I don't want to compete."

"Yes, with ze quidditch I can see zat," she spoke softly. "Lilly also said zat you are shy, and do not like being in ze spotlight. So she didn't feel zat you would even enter 'ad you been of age."

"Oh. I don't know about that," Harry said, getting a brief mental image of becoming the champion. "If I was of age, and there wasn't a quidditch tournament, I'd likely have tried."

"Well, regardless, we will be competing. I will be aiming to defeat you," she said.

"I'd expect nothing less," Harry said. "I'll be aiming to beat you as well. So is that why you wanted to speak to me?"

"Well, yes. I wanted to apologize for not believing you. I am sorry, 'Arry. I should not 'ave judged so swiftly." She stood and faced him as she spoke.

"I accept your apology, Fleur. I'm more than used to people rushing to judgment," he said, doing his best to brush it off. He realized, again, that his words likely sounded harsher than he intended them. But it had been a long week.

"Merci, 'Arry," she took a step or two toward him. "Now, I would like to be friends. I enjoyed your letters zis summer. Do you forgive me enough to try zat?" Harry almost laughed. She actually looked concerned. Like there was a chance that he wouldn't. Her wide blue eyes focused on him. He stared back and smiled ever so slightly.

"I'd like to be your friend," he admitted.

"Good," she said. "Zen we should do zis properly. I am Fleur Delacour and it is a pleasure to meet you." She held out her hand and sounded oddly formal. Harry reached out and took it. Her hand felt soft and fragile in his, but just by looking at her he could sense that she was far from fragile.

"Harry Potter," he said. "I'm pleased to make you acquaintance. The pleasure is all mine." He shook her hand gently before letting go.

"Thank you," she said. "Unfortunately, I must return to ze carriage now. Madame Maxime 'as very strict rules in place. Good night, 'Arry."

"Good night, Fleur," he responded before watching her walk back to the large blue carriage that dominated a corner of the grounds.

Author's Note: At this point, the rest of the story has been planned, more or less. The next chapter will either be the first quidditch match, or the first task, depending on what I feel like writing more. Also, I wouldn't expect updates quite as quickly. The blizzard that hit the midwest last week gave me ample time to write, and resulted in the third updated in about two and a half weeks. It usually takes me about that length of time to complete one chapter.

As always, thanks for the reviews. I appreciate them all. I hope you enjoyed the update!

Chapter 8

Quidditch

The next few weeks passed quicker than Harry realized. He didn't focus much on the individual tournament, as he was being drilled into the ground by a combination of Hooch and Davies.

He still did attend most of his classes, which surprised even him. But they were easier when he could bounce homework ideas off of the older students on the team. None of them even really had a problem with helping him. Of course, they probably figured the sooner his work was done, the more he could focus on quidditch.

Of course, he wasn't a perfect student. He did skip divination almost regularly, and skived off of potions every now and again. Snape was almost unbearable at this point, and Harry simply didn't feel like dealing with it.

And that's how he awoke one weekday morning. He knew he had potions that day, and he simply didn't feel like going, so he was going to use the champion excuse to not. He rolled out of bed and used the boys' showers quickly. He was the only one there.

When he finished he wandered down to the common room. It was busier than normal. Most of the students were gathering the last supplies they needed before heading to class. Alicia approached him when she saw him.

"Hey Harry, schedule has been posted," she said, stepping past him to gather up her bag.

"Oh? Who do we get first?" He asked, turning to watch her grab her bag.

"Check for yourself," she teased. Harry rolled his eyes and walked over to the tournament bulletin board. He scanned it quickly. The top thing was the scheduling of the first individual tournament task. He already knew when that was, so he skipped down.

The next posted section was the quidditch schedule. The first match was scheduled a few days before the first task. Harry stared at it for a few moments before just smiling. The text on the paper was

simple. It just said Hogwarts V. Durmstrang 1:00 PM. Karkaroff still hadn't released who would be on the Durmstrang team.

After that he noticed that Durmstrang played Beauxbatons a few days before the winter break. In the middle of February Hogwarts played Beauxbatons. Then the last game, scheduled much later, toward the end of the semester, was to be determined. But Harry didn't care about those details yet. He knew his first opponent, and he couldn't wait for the match. The best part was that it was under a week away.

His eyes scanned the rest of the sheet as well, mostly to see just what events were involved. The academic competition seemed to be the most prevalent event. It appeared that each school went up against the other on every class, about once a month, over the course of the school year. Harry realized he wasn't even sure who would be on the team for that. He'd been too busy with quidditch to even bother.

The next event that appeared the most was the dueling. There it seemed like a group of nine duelers, three from each school would fight three separate times over the course of the year. Again, Harry wasn't the sure who would be representing his school there. At the very least, dueling seemed like it would be more interesting than the academic competition.

Gobstones, chess, and exploding snap also had their own little tournaments, usually devoted to a weekend date where nothing else appeared to be planned. There was even a dance competition of some sort scheduled for early January. There were also some notices on who to contact if one was interested in any of the above games. Harry wasn't. He wasn't even sure if he'd go watch any of them.

The last item on the list was some sort of ball for Christmas Eve. He tucked that away mentally before heading down to the great hall to take in a leisurely breakfast.

The only Gryffindor's at the table were lower years that Harry didn't really know that well. He made his way over toward it, thinking he'd just sit by himself at the end when someone called out.

"Hey Harry, come here," He turned to see Lilly waving him over. She sat at the Ravenclaw table with Roger and Malcolm. Harry walked over and sat down next to the Hufflepuff.

"What's up?" He asked as he sat down, helping himself to some eggs and toast.

"You going to class this morning?" the pretty Ravenclaw asked.

"Probably not. You need something?"

"Yea, Malcolm and I have creatures this morning. But Hagrid has seemed busy for the last few days so we're expecting to get out early. I wanted to work on some defensive breakaway drills. I would prefer to have it be more than one on one. You in?" she asked.

"Sure," Harry said. "Roger is busy I take it?"

"Yea I have runes," Roger said. "In fact. I'm going to be late. See you guys later," The captain said before leaving the table.

"Will we need a keeper?" Harry asked. He didn't know where Herbert or Cormac were, but he figured they could find someone to float up near the hoops. Or, if it really mattered, he'd try it and the other person could play chaser.

"Nah," Lilly said. "My goal is going to be to make it so you don't get a shot off or at the very least force you into a low percentage shot. Not going to really care if you score or not." Harry was going to formulate a response when he heard an annoying voice behind him.

"What, Potter, not even allowed at your house table now?" Draco Malfoy said. Harry turned and looked at him. He wore the same usual smirk he had, but now it was accompanied by a flashing badge on his chest. Harry had seen a few of those badges before, but had never registered it that it read 'Support Cedric Diggory' followed by 'Potter Stinks'. He also noticed a large green "C" on Draco's robes.

"Aren't you supposed to be in potions right now?" Harry asked, looking up at Malfoy.

"Captain's privilege. Professor Snape feels I could spend the time better practicing dueling than working on a subject I'm already masterful in," Draco sneered. Harry realized that meant Malfoy was the captain of the Dueling team. The thought made him sick. He half expected Draco's father bought that.

"Oh, so that's why I had to tutor you for all you second year?" Lilly asked. Harry blinked and looked at her.

"That was advanced instruction!" Draco spat.

"Sorry, but advanced wouldn't be doing the year end first year potions again," Lilly commented. Harry could tell Draco didn't know what to say, so he chose to focus the conversation back onto Harry.

"What is she your girlfriend now? Certainly a step up from the Mudblood." Draco leered. Lilly just laughed.

"No. My boyfriend is a tad older, and more famous, than Harry. Perhaps you'll meet him. I warn you, though, if you leer at me like that in his presence, he may hurt you." Lilly sounded rather sure of that statement.

"Oh, famous? Do I know him?" Draco laughed.

"Probably. We were at one of your father's dumb parties." Lilly said. That seemed to make the wheels in Draco's head spin. "I assume that gaudy badge on your robe means you're the dueling captain?"

"Yes, which is above you two alternates," Draco bragged.

"Yes, it must be. Too bad you only have authority over the dueling team. I'd ask you to come help us with our quidditch drills, but I've got a feeling you need all the dueling practice you can get," Lilly smiled sweetly at him. "We'll all be cheering for you. Don't go embarrassing the school now." Draco went incredibly pale as Lilly stood and started to leave the Great Hall. The two boys followed her. It was Malcolm who spoke first.

"You go to parties at Malfoy Manor?" Malcolm asked.

"Begrudgingly. My father is too polite to decline the invitation."

"What does your father even do?"

"Oh he dabbles," Lilly responded.

"That's not an answer," Harry said.

"Sure it is. It's just not a very good one," Lilly said as they walked outside. "Well, we'll see you on the pitch in a bit, Harry." He just nodded and moved off toward the locker room while the other two wandered toward Hagrid's hut.

Sure enough, Lilly was right. Harry floated above the pitch on his Lotus while the two students walked toward the locker room about fifteen minutes later. Hagrid must really be busy with something. Harry made a mental note to visit him at some point. The gamekeeper had come to watch a few of his practices, but they hadn't really talked much this year.

A few minutes later the two teammates flew up by him. Harry moved to one set of hoops, and Lilly the other. Malcolm flew up next to him.

"What should we try?" Harry asked. Malcolm looked a little confused, like he expected Harry to call the plays. But after a minute he shrugged.

"You start, hit me about mid field. I'll give it back to you around the zone. She's going to expect me to take the shot, so go hard to the right hoop and try it?"

"Works for me," Harry said. They tried the play. It may have worked, but Malcolm didn't get much on the pass and Lilly managed to intercept it.

"Going to have to try harder than that boys," she laughed as she tossed the quaffle to Harry.

"Same thing," Harry said as they flew back. "But this time let's reverse it." It worked a little bit better, but Lilly managed to knock away the shot.

They kept that up for about a half hour. Malcolm and Harry started to get more past her as they grew more accustomed to playing together. Malcolm took most of the shots. On the last run Malcolm

beat her rather spectacularly with a fake pass into a quick dangle and a hard high shot. The ball sailed off toward the forest as Lilly cursed loudly. She went to retrieve it. After a few minutes she flew back.

"Hey, Harry. You should probably see this," she said as she came back, tossing the quaffle to Malcolm.

"What is it?" Harry asked, flying over toward here.

"Oh just follow me," she said, flying off toward the forest. They skimmed just above the tree tops. Lilly flew toward a specific corner of the forest. "I saw some smoke rise up over here and cruised over to check it out." Harry looked down toward the forest canopy. Through the trees, in a slight clearing, he spotted four distinct beasts. Dragons. No wonder Hagrid had been busy.

"Four of them," Harry said dumbly. "Wonder whatever they could be for." Lilly laughed a little bit.

"Yea, I'm sure they'll be happy to see you, too. Seeing as they're all penned up now."

"They're not going to make me fight one," Harry said, as if trying to convince himself.

"I doubt it. It takes five or six full grown, trained, wizards to take one down. None of the champions would stand a chance against a dragon head to head," Lilly said.

"So I'll likely have to avoid it or out maneuver it," Harry said.

"That seems like a better bet, yes."

"Well that will be difficult. I'm certainly not faster than a dragon."

"Their weak spot is the eyes. If you can hit it in the eye with something," Lilly started, but Harry interrupted.

"Then I have a blind, angry dragon. I'm not sure if that's an upgrade."

"Yea, probably isn't," Lilly admitted.

"Hmm. I'm allowed a wand. What can I do to make myself faster? Charm my feet? No. That probably wouldn't help. I bet it would take a lot of power to transfigure a dragon into something?" He was mostly thinking aloud.

"Yea. It would probably take McGonagall and Dumbledore to transfigure one. And even then, they'd have to have it restrained," Lilly commented.

"Out fly it," A voice spoke from behind them. They swerved their brooms around to see Malcolm had followed. "I'm so telling Cedric its dragons, by the way."

Go right ahead," Harry laughed. "But how do I out fly it? I'd need my-" he paused for a moment. "Shit. Flitwick won't teach the summoning charm until near break. You two know it, right? I need to master it."

"What are you going to do?" Malcolm asked.

"I'm going to leave my Firebolt out by a window and summon it to me. Hopefully the dragon doesn't eat me before I get it."

"You seriously think you can out fly a dragon?" Lilly asked, sounding rather skeptical.

"No idea," Harry admitted. "You have a better idea? I doubt they'll let it roam free around the grounds."

"But what if they don't let it fly?" Lilly asked.

"Well then I'm going to have to think of something," Harry said. "Will you two help teach me the spell?"

"Sorry, Harry," Malcolm said first. "But I'm going to go tell Cedric. Good luck man," Malcolm said. Harry couldn't blame him. He'd probably go tell his friend too, if one of them was competing. He watched Malcolm fly back toward the locker room.

"I'm free till lunch. But after that you're going to have to find someone else," Lilly said. Harry nodded and they flew off after Malcolm.

They didn't even bother changing yet. Instead Lilly took the cushions out of the furniture in the locker room and littered them about.

"Alright. It isn't a particularly hard charm. Students usually get it after one day of charms class. You just have to know where about the item you are trying to summon is. And be able to picture it clearly in your mind. Obviously it's the easiest if you're looking right at the item. After that, you just say the incantation, which is *accio*, point in the general direction, and hope something comes flying your way. Like *Accio Cushion*," she pointed at one of the cushions she had just scattered around the room. It flew right up to her, landing at her feet. "Oh and I should mention, smaller objects you'll be able to catch. Larger ones it's best to get out of the way."

"Sounds pretty straight forward," Harry said.

"It is. Of course, depending on the distance of the item, and the strength of the spell, things can take more or less time to show up. Give it a try," she said.

"*Accio cushion*," Harry said, pointing his wand at one of the closer cushions. It wiggled just a little bit, but made no noticeable movement toward him.

"Not bad. Most people don't get any movement on their first try. Took me at least five attempts to get it to move," she commented. "Try again."

"*Accio cushion*," Harry said dumbly. Nothing happened.

"No, you have to keep focused," Lilly scolded. "Try it again." Harry took a deep breath and focused himself. He looked at one of the cushions, pointed his wand and spoke.

"*Accio cushion!*" The cushion jumped a few feet toward him.

"Much better. Now try a closer one." Lilly kicked one closer to him as she spoke.

"*Accio cushion*," he said again, this time pointing his wand at the one closest to him. It flew directly at him, very quickly. It hit him square in the chest and knocked him onto the ground. Lilly laughed quite loudly.

"Alright! We're getting there. Quickly too! The next step is control. You should have this down quickly. Of course, something much further away will be harder."

"That wasn't funny," Harry grumbled as he pulled himself up off the ground.

"I respectfully disagree," Lilly stated. "Now get back to work."

By the time lunch finished, Harry felt he had a pretty good feel for the charm. He could summon just about anything in the locker room without much difficulty. Some of his teammates stopped by around lunch and helped out. Or at least found other random objects for him to attempt to summon.

They even took a few things outside and had him summon them back inside. He'd want to work on some distance things in the next couple of days in his free time, but he felt he had it down.

"I think you've got it," Lilly said.

"Me too. Thanks." Harry responded.

"No problem," she said.

"Yea, we wouldn't want you to get hurt in the first task. At least it's after the game," Roger said.

"Well. I'm going to head to class then. I'll see you guys later," Lilly said, turning toward Harry and the door.

"Let me help," Harry said, smirking. He pointed his wand at her. "Accio Lilly." She flew toward him, crashing into him near the door. They fell to the ground, Lilly on top of him, to much laughter from the teammates in the locker room.

"Cute, Harry," Lilly said. Ginny entered the locker room and looked at them. She blushed quite a bit and scurried over toward her locker.

"Well it's good to know it works on people," Harry teased from underneath the chaser. She rolled off of him, giving him a playful swat as she did, and stood.

"I suppose it is. I'm off to class. If any of you summon me back, I will hurt you," she teased to more laughter.

"What was that about?" Ginny asked meekly as Harry walked past her, toward one of the couches.

"Fun with summoning charms?" Harry responded with a smile. Ginny crossed her arms, nodded and went back to her locker. Harry tossed himself down onto one of the couches and thought about the first task, taking no notice of Ginny's reaction.

He couldn't sleep that night. He hoped it wasn't pre match jitters a day early. That would be unfortunate. He didn't think that was the cause, though. Mostly because his mind kept coming back to Fleur and the dragons. Something just didn't feel right about him knowing and her not.

So he grabbed his invisibility cloak, some parchment, an envelope, and the Marauder's Map before stepping out of the dorm. He quickly stepped through the common room and out into the castle proper. A quick look of the map revealed no one was in the hallway near him so he moved quickly toward the owlery.

The night air was chilly so the large open room was rather unpleasant to stand in. It didn't help that he was still in his pajamas, with the exception of the cloak. Interestingly, he noticed some of the owls looked at him, despite being under the cloak. He wondered if they could see some sort of distortion, or if their vision was simply that much better. Still, he took out the bit of parchment and composed a quick letter.

Fleur,

I am sorry that we have not had much contact lately. With the upcoming task and match, I have been rather busy. I'm sure you have been too.

I'm writing now to tell you something I discovered today. When we were practicing earlier today we discovered something over the forest. In the northwest corner they're keeping four dragons caged up. I can't imagine what four dragons would be doing on the school grounds, unless it's for the tournament.

One of our chasers said he was going to inform Cedric, and since I know, I figured it would be unfair if you didn't know as well. I doubt they'll make us combat a dragon, but I'm sure it will be involved in the first task.

I suppose this letter is rather anti the spirit of 'facing the unknown' but I dislike having an unfair advantage.

Anyway, I hope your time at Hogwarts has been going well so far. I'd like to show you around the castle, if given the opportunity. I know I'll have more free time after the first task and match. I hope we can chat more then.

Until then, though, best of luck in the first task and the academic competition. I believe you said you were going to try to compete in that if you weren't the Beauxbaton's champion, is that still the case now that you are? If so, that may be enough incentive for me to actually watch those events!

Sincerely,

Harry.

He scanned it once, figuring it was good enough for what he wanted to say. He hoped she would appreciate it. He quickly scratched 'Fleur Delacour, Beauxbaton's Carriage,' onto the envelope and tucked the letter inside. He pulled off the cloak and found Hedwig, who despite the hour was sleeping on a perch a little to his right. She opened her eyes and hooted affectionately at him.

"Hey Hedwig," he said. "Would you mind taking this letter for me?" he showed it to her. She looked at it for a moment before simply hooting again. He put the envelope down for Hedwig to take. Instead, she simply closed her eyes again.

"Hey, aren't you going to take that?" Harry asked. Hedwig opened her eyes again, looking rather annoyed. She made a pointed show of turning her head to look out one of the windows. Harry noticed the Beauxbaton's carriage was only a few hundred meters away. Hedwig turned her head back to look at him. Her eyes indicated he was a fool for assuming that it would take her more than a few minutes to complete his request.

"Oh come on, Hedwig. It's urgent!" Harry pleaded. His owl sized him up before spreading her wings. Harry assumed she was going to fly off, but instead she wacked him in the head with one of her wings, and resumed her normal position on the perch. Harry sighed.

"Oh fine. And don't badger her for a reply this time. I kind of like her, so be nice." Hedwig didn't make any motion. Harry knew enough to know when his owl was jilting him, so he threw the cloak back on and scanned the map once more.

Nothing out of the ordinary on the map. Well, except that Barty Crouch and Alastor Moody were doing something in Moody's office. Their dots were strangely close. Close enough that Harry didn't really want to think about what that something could be. He watched for a moment as Crouch moved away from Moody. He shook his head, deciding whatever the professor got up to was his own business and walked back to bed.

Fleur didn't reply for a few days. Harry almost assumed that Hedwig had intentionally decided to not deliver the letter. Of course, his owl hadn't done anything like that before. Perhaps Fleur was simply too busy with the thought of the dragon to do anything about it.

He awoke the day of the match with the same early morning jitters he always had. When he got down to the common room, he saw the other Gryffindor members of the team were waiting for him.

"Couldn't sleep?" he asked.

"Nope," Fred said. "We were about to come wake you up."

"Yea, we planned on having breakfast, a quick morning jog, and then twitching nervously in the locker room until the match. Join us?" George asked.

"Sure," Harry said.

They sat at the Gryffindor table in the nearly empty Great Hall and ate slowly. Harry just picked at some toast. He saw an owl fly into the hall, a tad early for the post. It flew over to the table and dropped a letter in front of him. He didn't recognize the bird, but it has a Beauxbaton's crest on it. He opened it quickly and looked at it.

There was just one sentence on the parchment, written in a familiar, pretty cursive.

The sentence simply read. 'Meet me by the carriage two hours after the match.' Harry looked at it, folded it up, and put it into his pocket. The rest of the team didn't even seem to notice.

They spent the morning, twitching nervously, in the locker room. Harry spent an hour going over his Lotus making sure it was in perfect working order. He noticed some other teammates did as well. Around noon they changed into their black tournament uniforms. It was the first time any of them had put it on.

Harry looked over at Lilly at the locker next to him and couldn't help but think that the uniforms looked pretty good as the chaser absentmindedly pulled her hair back for the game.

After a few minutes Hooch came into the locker room.

"Alright. This is what we've trained for. Go out there and fly your hearts out. You are every bit as good, if not better, than they are. As you know, the three preliminary matches determine which two teams will play in the championship at the end of the year. If you win here, you control your own destinies for that. Let's go out there and show them what Hogwarts is made of!" There was a cheer of agreement from the players.

"Well then," Hooch continued. "Line up by the locker room door. The announcer will introduce the Durmstrang starters first, followed by our starters. Fly out as they call your name. Circle around the north hoops. There will be a few minutes of warm up before the match starts. Reserves, follow me to the benches on the side," Hooch explained. Roger stood first and moved to the door, Harry and Lilly followed, giving small words of encouragement to the other players, and trying their best to not seem nervous as well.

Harry waited as they stood outside the locker room. They could tell that the pitch was already packed with students and others. It looked like the stands had been magically enhanced. He couldn't begin to guess how many people were waiting out there. Less than the World Cup was the best number he could come up with. But after a while, Ludo Bagman's enhanced voice penetrated his mind.

"Ladies and Gentleman, welcome to the first Interschool Quidditch Match of the Triwizard Tournament. Today Durmstrang will challenge Hogwarts on the first leg of our four match tournament. As you all know, each team will play the other once, and then the final match will be the two teams with the best records. If there is a tie, the tiebreaker will be overall points scored.

"Now, without further ado, the Durmstrang Quidditch team. We have Kubica, Strauss, Bathory, Petrov, Ivanova, Nadasdy and the team captain, Viktor Krum!" Cheers exploded from the pitch. Harry watched seven figures fly from one of the locker rooms on the other side of the pitch. Their uniforms were a deep blood red and had the Durmstrang crest on the chest. Harry's eyes found Krum easily enough in the distance. He couldn't help but smirk that he would get a chance to fly against the absolute best.

"And now we have the home team. Ladies and gentleman, I present you with Fleet!" Herbert took off flying toward the hoops as his name was called. Every player would do the same behind him as their name came up. "Weasley, Weasley, captain Roger Davies, Spinnet, Selson, and Potter!" Harry chased after the number six in front of him. When she swooped down to fly in a circle with the chasers, he lifted off and hovered near the start of their defensive zone. His eyes found Krum, who was talking with one of his beaters.

Krum's beater flew off, Harry saw the three on her back and assumed it was Bathory, even though he couldn't read the black lettering from the distance. Krum flew toward the center of the pitch. He waited next to the referee, whom Harry didn't recognize. At the very least, he looked professional

He gazed down and saw Hooch standing behind the bench where the reserve players sat. They all stared up at the players flying around and looked slightly awed. He wondered if he looked like that, just flying rather than sitting.

He also noticed the advertisements on the pitch that had replaced house colors. Lotus, Renault, and Mercedes-Benz were the most prevalent, but other companies had apparently offered up money too. Even The Hog's Head had a small place. Of course, with all the people present it would probably do rather good business that night.

A few moments later Roger flew over toward the center of the pitch and shook hands with Krum. He and Krum both flew back toward their teams then. Harry fell in next to Roger as the Captain spoke.

"Well here we go. This is what it's all about. Let's go and represent our school as best we can. Hogwarts on three," he put his hand in and they counted off with a loud team yell.

They lined up then. Harry went to the seeker's spot, above the action, a little bit back of the center of the field. He instinctively knew Fred and George were perfectly spaced behind him. He watched the chasers move into position then. Roger on the left, Lilly in the middle and Alicia on the right.

"Alright, Ladies and Gentlemen here and listening on the wireless. We're lined up and ready to go. We have Hogwarts in black with yellow lettering, and Durmstrang in red with black lettering.

"The official moves in with the quaffle, there's the toss, won by Hogwarts, and we're underway. Sessler back to Davies. The captain down the left wing throws it back to Sessler as he dodges a bludger from Strauss. Sessler over to Spinnet. She shoots! Kicked away by Kubica. Rebound is loose! Davies gets it and he scores! That's ten to nothing Hogwarts!" The crowd exploded. Harry pumped his fist once, glad for the opening goal, and glad how quickly it came. He circled above the pitch, looking only for the snitch and stray bludgers. Krum did the same, keeping his distance from Harry as he did. Bagman's voice rang through the stadium again as the match resumed.

"Durmstrang with possession. Petrov to Ivanova, back to Petrov, no! Stolen by Sessler, she hits Spinnet who shoots and scores! Twenty to nothing!" Bagman shouted. "What a steal there for that young lady, and a great goal for the other Hogwarts femme fatale!" Harry breathed a sigh of relief. They had thought their chaser line would be good, and so far it appeared to be. He dove a tad lower to scan closer to the ground for the snitch as the game continued.

"Durmstrang back with possession. Petrov to Ivanova up field to Nadasdy back over to Petrov. Sessler moves in to attempt the steal but dives out of the way to avoid the bludger from Bathory. Petrov passes back to Nadasdy who shoots! Save by Fleet. He throws it to Davies who passes to Spinnet. Intercepted! Petrov in and alone, he

cuts high, no he cuts back, Fleet dives! Goal! Twenty to ten!" Harry cursed under his breath. He flew back to a higher altitude to look for a snitch.

"Hogwarts back in possession. Sesion inbounds it to Davies. He tosses it to Spinnet who narrowly avoids that bludger from Strauss! She drops the quaffle though. Petrov has it. No! A perfect bludger by Weasley. Not sure which Weasley, though. Sesion in possession. She takes it into the Durmstrang zone. She's in the open. She dives low, cuts back up and shoots! No, passes to Davies who buries it! What a misdirection! Thirty-Ten!" Harry had watched them practice that play before. Both Fleet and Cormac hated it, and they often knew when it was coming.

"Durmstrang back in possession. Petrov to Nadasdy over to Ivanova, back up to Petrov who loses it dodging a bludger. Picked up by Davies, throws it across the pitch toward Spinnet but it's intercepted by Ivanova who hits Petrov who hurls it down to Nadasdy who's in on a breakaway! He cuts left, right, back left, fakes right and scores! That's Thirty-Two Hogwarts!" Harry made a series of quick hand signals to Roger, who nodded and made a similar series of gestures to the rest of the team. If Durmstrang wanted to run their own designed breakaway play, they would do the same.

"Spinnet in possession. She passes it to Sesion, who returns it right back to Spinnet. Spinnet hurls it down the length of the pitch and Davies is there! He catches it, he's all alone, he goes right, left, shoots! Save Kubica!

"Kubica gets it out to Petrov, who finds Ivanova. She takes it down to Nadasdy. He finds Petrov. Spinnet tries to block him but he gets it around her back to Ivanova who shoots! Save Fleet!

"Fleet finds Sesion, who hits Spinnet, who dodges a bludger from Strauss, who just gets nailed by a return bludger from Weasley. Davies with the quaffle now. No he turns it over to Petrov who goes hard at the hoops! Another great save by Fleet!

"Fleet returns it to Davies. The Weasley twins clear the way sending Bludgers at Petrov and Bathory. Bathory returns one but Weasley hits it right back at Ivanova. Hogwarts has a three on one now. Davies hits Sesion. She passes to Spinnet, back to Davies who shoots!

Save by Kubica but he allows he rebound. Sesion picks it up, left hoop is wide open! And that's Forty to twenty Hogwarts!"

"Petrov inbounds it to Ivanova. She looks for Nadasdy. Intercepted by Sesion, she swerves around Ivanova and shoots. Goal! Fifty to twenty! And it appears Durmstrang has called a timeout. We'll take a moment for our sponsors." Bagman started to read an ad as Harry and the rest of the team landed near Hooch and the reserves.

"Good good. You have their keeper on the ropes. Keep the pressure on him and let's make Krum think about the World Cup. Keep playing the zone on defense. You're doing great. Weasleys, throw more bludgers at Petrov and Nadasdy, you're giving them the zone a tad easier than I'd like. Now get back up there!" Hooch ordered. The players shot back into the air and flew around their own zone as they waited for the Durmstrang team to finish. The official landed by the Durmstrang team after the timeout expired and prepped for resuming play.

"Well it looks like they're ready to resume play now. Petrov to Ivanova. She takes it up to the center of the pitch before passing to Nadasdy. Ouch! He barely got that one away before that bludger. Petrov picks it up. Another bludger! He gets the shot off but it's very weak. Easily scooped up by Fleet.

"Fleet tosses it out to Davies. He tosses it to Spinnet. Over to Sesion who goes right through Ivanova and Nadasdy. She hits Spinnet on the wing. Spinnet with the shot! Right past Kubica! Sixty-Twenty! Seems like Durmstrang tempers are flaring up a bit. Kubica is yelling at Petrov.

"Well, Ivanova doesn't seem to care. She inbounds it to Nadasdy. He returns it to her. Petrov is finally back in the play, he takes it from Ivanova and throws it at Nadasdy. Sesion cuts in front of the shot, but Ivanova gets it around her. Saved easily by Fleet!

"Fleet throws it behind the Durmstrang chasers to Spinnet. She's all alone! Weasley blocks a bludger from Bathory and Spinnet is in on the breakaway! A quick move to the left, Kubica is out of position! Goal! Seventy-Twenty Hogwarts!" Harry couldn't help but smirk from his broom. Durmstrang's chasers were obviously unprepared for the aggressive play of the Hogwarts bunch. He kept scanning for the snitch. So far there was no sign of it.

"Durmstrang has possession again. Petrov to Ivanova. Wait! Krum has spotted something. He's speeding off toward the other side of the pitch!" Harry looked over at where he had last spotted Viktor Krum. Sure enough, Krum was speeding over toward the far corner of the pitch. Harry didn't see anything, but he followed the Bulgarian seeker anyway. He tuned out Bagman's commentary as he did, which he could tell focused on Krum.

When Harry had almost caught up with his opposite when Krum pulled a very fast reverse move and darted the other way. Harry still saw no sign of the snitch, but decided again to follow. He assumed Krum was testing his skills, and he would do his best to keep up. He pulled the same move as Krum, to much cheering from the crowd, and chased after the Durmstrang seeker.

When he had almost caught up Krum started to dive. Harry recognized the move from the World Cup. By now he knew the entire thing had been a diversion, but he also knew it was better to keep pace just in case it wasn't.

He followed Krum into the feint and almost immediately regretted it. He saw Bathory and Strauss line up shots and knew he would have almost nowhere to go. Strauss hit his first, aiming it directly between where Krum and Harry were. Harry dodged to the right on instinct and saw Bathory fire her shot to where he would be. He barely swerved out of the way of it as Krum pulled out of the feint and resumed circling the stadium.

"What a move by Potter to avoid that excellently executed beater move by Durmstrang!" Bagman's voice boomed through the stadium. The Hogwarts faithful gave Harry another cheer before Bagman continued.

"We missed out on a bit of scoring there, too. I've just been given the updated boxscore. It looks like we had Selsion from Spinnet, followed by Spinnet from Davies. Durmstrang then answered with Petrov from Ivanova and Petrov from Nadasdy. But Hogwarts came right back as Davies from Spinnet again, followed by Davies from Selsion. Durmstrang scored the most recent goal with Nadasdy from Ivanova. Which brings our total to 110-50 Hogwarts.

"Worked in there, too, for those watching at home, six saves by Fleet and five saves by Kubica.

"Hogwarts still has possession. Davies over to Seslion. Back to Davies as they enter the Durmstrang zone. Davies cuts past Petrov and tosses it up, blindly, to Seslion. She fakes the shot and leaves the quaffle for Spinnet who shoots! Save by Kubica!

"Durmstrang back in possession. Petrov up to Ivanova. She takes it around, cutting outside of Spinnet while dodging a bludger. She passes it back to Petrov who fakes to Nadasdy, drawing Seslion out of position as she goes to attempt the takeaway. Petrov hits Ivanova who shoots! Save by Fleet!" Harry tuned out Bagman then. He figured the chasers had it well in hand so he focused his attention on the snitch.

Harry raced along the edges of the stadium, scanning inwards for the snitch. He noticed some familiar faces in the stands. Ron and Hermione sat together. Interestingly, Lavender Brown sat on the other side of Ron.

Draco Malfoy sat not far away from that group. He was wearing a replica Krum jersey from the World Cup, his dueling captain's badge still prominently displayed next to his 'Potter stinks' badge. Harry made a mental note to support Beauxbatons during the dueling portion of the tournament.

He passed a large red contingent that he could only assume was Durmstrang students and supporters. Nothing seemed too out of the ordinary with that.

The next group he flew past was obviously the Beauxbaton's contingent. A few of the students there also wore Krum jerseys, but most just wore their blue uniforms. Harry spotted Fleur in the stands, sitting with a bunch of other girls. They were chatting, and seemed to be paying little attention to the game. She caught his eye as he flew by and could have sworn she smiled.

Harry didn't have time to ponder that, though, as he continued his search for the snitch. He desperately wanted to catch the snitch and prove himself on par with Krum. He didn't care how he performed against him in the individual competition, but beating him at quidditch would be the highlight of Harry's young life.

There was still no sign of the snitch. Harry saw Krum was simply floating above the pitch, simply surveying the area in his search for the snitch. The Durmstrang seeker easily dodged a bludger hit by one of the Weasley twins, without even seeming concerned that it came near him. Harry dodged a retaliatory shot from Strauss as he pulled his Lotus up and examined the pitch as well. He watched a play develop beneath him, wondering what he had missed while he had tuned Bagman out.

"Petrov passes it to Ivanova. She cuts back and tosses the quaffle to Nadasdy. He takes the shot and it's blocked by Fleet.

"Fleet tosses it to Sesion. She swings around behind the hoops and looks to set up the play. She finds Spinnet who tosses it quickly to Davies. Davies takes it out of the Hogwarts zone. Petrov tries to block him but a bludger changes his plans. Davies ducks under Ivanova and finds Spinnet entering the Durmstrang zone. She flies around Bathory trying to place a bludger shot. Spinnet throws to Sesion in front of the hoops who takes the shot! Goal! That's a one hundred point lead for Hogwarts. 150-50!

"The superb play of Fleet has completely stifled the Durmstrang chaser line and Hogwarts shows no intention of letting up. This is beginning to look very similar to the World Cup. " Harry tuned Bagman out again. He knew it was well past time to end this game, but he had still seen no sign of the snitch.

Then he noticed Krum push his broom into a dive. Harry couldn't tell if it was a feint or not so he took off after him. Krum abruptly cut around, as if he were chasing the snitch. Harry followed as closely as he could, trying to force his broom onto a better line than he currently was to gain more ground on Krum. As Harry caught up Krum the Bulgarian pulled himself into a steep climb, obstructing Harry's view enough that he couldn't tell if the Durmstrang player was actually chasing a snitch or not.

After about a hundred feet he leveled out, well above the crowd at the stadium. Krum put himself into an extremely sharp banked turn and moved clockwise, still managing to keep his body blocking Harry's line of sight for the Snitch. Harry followed for a few moments before Krum reversed directions.

Harry pulled up and looked over the scene, trying to see if the Bulgarian was actually chasing the snitch. He didn't have long to look though, as Krum immediately forced his broom into a dive, again blocking Harry's view of whatever he was chasing.

Harry dove right after him, pressing himself as low to his broom as he possibly could, making himself as small and as fast as the broom would allow. He slowly caught up to Krum, trying desperately to overtake his opposite, debating then between blocking him if he were chasing the snitch, or peeling off and resuming his search if he wasn't.

He was pushing himself faster when he saw it. A flash of gold cut through his line of sight, banking off to his left. Krum kept diving but Harry reacted on instinct and pulled hard out of the dive, feeling like the force of his turn would knock him off of his broom. He kept himself stable and chased after the snitch. Judging by the gasp from the crowd, Krum was doing the same thing.

The snitch cut upwards as Harry closed in on it. He knew if Krum was following him, which he expected the professional seeker to be doing, he'd have the better line pulling up after it, so Harry continued forward into a larger turn radius and darted back after the snitch.

Sure enough, he just beat Krum coming up and stayed ahead of him as he raced after the snitch. It maneuvered into a quick left-right chicane, Harry followed it perfectly, Krum trailed enough that he simply kept going straight and picked up ground on both Harry and the Snitch.

Harry blocked Krum as best he could as he closed in on the snitch. While he couldn't see the Bulgarian behind him, he could sense the presence gaining.

The snitch abruptly dove, and Harry followed it. Again, he could sense Krum taking his exact line. The snitch only dove for a few seconds before leveling out and taking a sharp left. Harry followed it, knowing that he was getting closer, and that in a few more seconds victory would be his.

It continued straight through the center of the pitch, and the two seekers flew expertly through the opposing chasers. By now they were dodging the occasional bludger out of instinct. But the beaters

focused a bit more on the chasers, for fear of taking their own seeker out with a poorly aimed shot.

He was almost in range when the snitch darted quickly to the right. He swiped his arm out, attempting to grab it as it did, but he missed by a few inches. He could feel the air from the wings on his hand, but that was it.

He knew it was over as he turned his broom to follow. He saw out of the corner of his eye that Krum had taken the turn better, and had a better line. The Durmstrang seeker shot inside of him and quickly engulfed the snitch.

"Ladies and Gentleman Krum has the snitch! Krum has the snitch. We missed out on a bit of scoring in that great chase there! We had Davies from Seshion, Ivanova from Petrov, and Spinnet from Davies shortly before Krum ended the match. The final score 210-170 Durmstrang!" Harry tuned out Bagman after that last announcement. Harry wasn't sure what to do. He'd never lost while conscious. He simply floated slowly toward his team, looking confused and dejected and feeling like he had let everyone down.

He wasn't sure how he got back to the locker room. Or how he changed out of his uniform. He simply sat in his locker and stared out. His teammates came up to him and said things like:

"Don't worry man, we'll just crush Beauxbatons and get a rematch."

"He's the best in the world for a reason. It's not your fault."

"We'll get them back."

"You played great. That was amazing flying, just wow."

"I mean it was Krum, Harry. He's the best."

Harry didn't really listen. He knew he'd lost. His teammates tried their best to make him feel like it wasn't his fault. But he didn't care. He'd been out flown for the first time in his life. He hated the feeling, he absolutely hated it. And he wasn't sure what to do about it. No one really wanted to hang around the locker room. But no one wanted to face the Hogwarts faithful, either.

At the very least it had been an entertaining game. But still, Harry couldn't shake the feeling that he had been the reason they lost. And that he was solely responsible for the defeat.

What he didn't know was that every one of his chasers was thinking about the shots that didn't go in that would have extended the lead, and that Herbert was going over missed saves in his head, wondering what he could have done to secure the win.

Harry realized just how much he hated losing. He vowed to practice harder, to improve, and to make sure that he got to fly against Krum once more. He didn't know if he could beat him. But he would do everything in his power to at least get another shot.

"Really, man. Don't worry about it," Davies said, sitting in Lilly's locker next to Harry. "We'll get him back."

"I was right there, man," Harry replied, almost angrily. "I had the line and everything."

"Well, we played hard. And if we beat Beauxbatons we have another shot at them. It'll just make it all the more sweeter." Roger stood and clapped him on the back. "Don't get too down on yourself. Even the best lose. Kick his ass with the first task and we'll worry about Beauxbatons." Roger started to walk away.

"You're not mad?" Harry asked. Roger turned and looked at him, then just started laughing.

"You flew toe-to-toe with Viktor Krum and almost beat him. Something most professional seekers can't do. Why would I be mad?" Durmstrang was a seventy point favorite, and we nearly beat them. We'll get them back." Roger said rather sternly, and Harry finally saw just why Hooch had made him the captain.

"Thanks," he replied weakly. Roger nodded and turned to leave.

"Just remember, Harry. Don't get yourself killed in the first task. We're going to need you if we're going to enact our revenge!" Harry couldn't help but smile. He felt a little bit better, but it would take a while before he was over the loss. He reached into the pocket of his robes and found the note he'd tucked there earlier and remembered he had somewhere he had to be.

Two hours later he stood outside the Beauxbaton's carriage, facing away from it. He'd been waiting for about fifteen minutes, simply staring out toward the lake and going through the match in his head. He didn't hear the soft footsteps behind him.

In fact, he didn't even notice he wasn't alone until a pair of soft arms wrapped around his body. He tensed immediately and almost tried to struggle out of the grip until he smelled the flowery perfume. She was taller than him, but she managed to put her head just above his shoulder as she hugged him tightly.

"It is me," Fleur said behind him. "You can relax." Harry felt his muscles loosen, he took a deep breath.

"Sorry," he said.

"I am sorry, too," she whispered. "You flew well."

"Not well enough," he mumbled.

"Nonsense," she scolded. "You flew your best."

"Well. I'll have to fly better against Beauxbatons and hopefully I'll get another shot at him." Harry said, firmly, as if saying it would make it happen. Fleur simply laughed quietly. "What?" Harry asked.

"Beauxbatons will not present a challenge," she said.

"You can't count out a team like that. That's when they surprise." Harry said.

"Oui. But you will be prepared. And after watching ze game, ze Beauxbatons team does not expect to be of consequence."

"Why is that?" Harry asked.

"We 'ave not played quidditch for very long. About five years. Ze team could tell today zat both Durmstrang and 'Ogwarts are better. We figured zat would be ze case. Today confirmed it," Fleur explained. She was still holding onto him. Harry rather liked having her chest pressed into his back, and her soft arms around him, so he made no attempt to move.

"Well, we will still be prepared," Harry said.

"I would expect nothing else," Fleur stated. "You do seem most determined."

"Yes. Well. Why did you ask me to come out here tonight?" Harry asked.

"It was about ze note that you sent me," Fleur said.

"Oh. I know we're not supposed to ask for help. But it just didn't seem fair, me having stumbled upon them like that," Harry said.

"Non. Zat is not it. Did you really simply fly over ze dragons in ze forest?" she asked.

"Yes. Well, Lilly did. Then she came and found me and took me over to where they were," Harry explained.

"I see. You did not know about ze dragons before zat?" she asked. Harry was confused. He wiggled a bit in Fleur's arms, trying to spin around and look at her. He managed to and stared into her wide blue eyes.

"No. I didn't. Why?" Harry asked. Fleur let her arms fall off of him and she took a few steps away. She started to talk to herself, in French. Harry had no idea what she was saying, but she seemed to be trying to think through something. She crossed her arms over her chest and paced back and forth for a few moments.

"You really did not know ze first task was dragons?" she asked, turning to look at him.

"No, why?" Harry asked.

"Madame Maxime told me about a week ago," Fleur explained. "She said zat all ze champions would know. I 'ave been preparing since." Harry was a little shocked. "Madame Maxime, she said zat ze tournament were often run like zis. I 'ave seen Krum practicing some sort of curse on ze boat. I assumed all of ze champions received ze same information."

"I just learned the other day. And Cedric had no idea when Malcom told him," Harry said. Fleur eyed him carefully as he spoke.

"I believe you. I am very disappointed in my institution. I 'ope zat you have a plan for ze dragons?"

"Yes. I do. I think I'll be okay." Harry explained.

"Zat is very good," she said. "I 'ope zat you do well."

"Well, you could always hug me again for luck," Harry said, blushing a little bit, but he did manage a smirk. Fleur laughed.

"You are very cute, 'Arry," she said, giving him her full smile when she spoke. For a moment, Harry lost himself in that smile.

"I'm glad you think so," he said. He realized just how lame that sounded and just how out of his league he was at flirting. But Fleur didn't seem to mind.

"'Arry, you must not be afraid to ask me for 'elp later in ze tournament, too," Fleur ordered.

"I will," Harry said dumbly. "Thanks."

"You are welcome, 'Arry. I must return to ze carriage now. Madame Maxime keeps us under very strict regulations. Do me a favor, 'Arry?" she asked sweetly. So sweetly Harry couldn't refuse.

"And what's that?" Harry asked.

"Keep writing to me. I 'ave enjoyed your letters and zey will be a way to circumvent ze rules. Perhaps we shall have another clandestine meeting later," she teased.

"I'd like that," Harry admitted. "And I will."

"Good," Fleur said. "Although. I do not believe zat your owl likes me."

"Hedwig? She's probably just jealous. She's rather independent," Harry defended his owl.

"I guess," Fleur said, sounding unconvinced. "Regardless. Bonne Nuit, Harry." "Good night, Fleur," he said as he watched her go. All he could think about when he walked back to the castle was that he really needed to learn more about, and get closer to, Fleur Delacour.

Author's Note: Thanks again for all of the reviews, I appreciate them all. I hadn't expected to complete this chapter in four days, so maybe I should say it'll be a longer time before updates more often. I'm not sure how I feel about how the match turned out, and plan on writing the Beauxbatons one differently, but we'll see. Props if ya get the not really veiled references on the Durmstrang team. Either way, get well soon, Robert (The team was decided well before the accident).

I should probably explain that I see Durmstrang as collection of pretty much everything east of France, hence the German, Polish, and Hungarian names.

Up next is the first task and maybe a little bit of ball preparation. Again, if you're interested in some beta work, contact me through PM or E-mail and thanks for the reviews!

Chapter 9

Dragons

Fleur Delacour took a deep, shaky, breath as she stepped out of the tent. The Welsh Green waited for her inside the large stadium that had been erected for the event. Fleur swallowed hard and went over her plan in her head. It wasn't that difficult. Assuming it worked. If not, her backup plan was relatively simple. Run around and think of anything to not wind up as dragon chow.

Her plan had worked well enough the first few times she'd practiced it. Of course, the first time her target had simply been her friend, and not a considerably larger, magical resistant, beast. But the theory was the same. At least in theory.

Of course, theory is a lot more comforting when you're in a classroom, practicing a spell on a target that doesn't think you look delicious. Well, Lilly may have thought she looked delicious, but that's not relevant.

She ran her fingers over her wand slowly as she waited to be called into the actual task. Ludo Bagman was announcing Cedric Diggory's. It sounded like he did fairly well.

Bagman then described Diggory's tactics. It sounded like he had transfigured a rock into a dog and used it as a distraction while he attempted to sneak in and grab the egg. Fleur thought that would probably be a decent plan if her first attempt didn't work. She wouldn't pick a dog though. She'd pick a big large cow. That would have to look more appetizing than a petit French girl.

Of course, this task would be so much easier if she could just charm the dragon with her Veela abilities. Just give it a nice smile, throw her hair over her shoulder, saunter up to it and caress it gently, and then grab the egg and get out of there.

It would be so much easier had the first task been men. Men she was use to dealing with. Her mother had prepared her well enough for that. She could ensnare most of them without a problem, if she so wished. She didn't usually wish, though. Often she would rather simply be left alone.

Well, not alone. But boys rarely walked up to other girls and expected them to immediately want them. Well, at least they did that less to others than her. Weren't teenage boys supposed to be nervous and afraid around pretty girls? What happened to that?

She didn't mind being part Veela. Truth be told, she rather enjoyed it, and really couldn't imagine being something else. Sure, she probably wasn't ready for some of the advances of older students in her first couple of years at Beauxbatons, but thankfully, largely to her mother's help, she escaped from them, innocence intact.

Those early years had been lonely, though. She had a very hard time making friends. Girls whom she had known before school stopped even talking to her at first. They'd come around, mostly, after a few years. But she'd sought company elsewhere, and it had almost ended poorly.

She was glad that Lilly had gone to Hogwarts rather than Beauxbatons. She had remained a friend through everything, probably because of the lack of time they actually spent around each other.

Still, she couldn't complain. She rather liked being a Veela. It certainly had its advantages. Especially now that she had some control over it. It was certainly easier to get out of the bad dates when she could simply charm them and have them realize just how much she wanted them to leave. It was surprisingly helpful.

Of course she did end up having a number of pretty terrible dates. Her mother had advised her to wait until she was older to really try to find someone. She'd said that men are much better when they grow up. Until then, she's suggested not letting anything get serious.

Fleur had followed that advice, more or less. There was an incident her second year at Beauxbatons that nearly resulted in the expulsion of a sixth year, but thankfully, for both Fleur and the male involved, Madame Maxime had found them, and stopped them, before anything happened.

That wasn't to say she was completely without complaint, though. People assumed since she was a quarter Veela she was not human. And that bothered her. What, she was just supposed to be some silly little nymph that let the satyr have its way with her? She'd much

rather not. Of course, that's probably what most of them thought. That she was simply there for their amusement.

Certainly, there had been archaic laws not too dissimilar from that. Thankfully, they were nearly entirely abolished.

Still, if she wasn't human, then what was she? Some sex-indoctrinated machine meant to simply please some 'powerful' male. That wasn't about to happen.

That was one of the reason she decided to enter the tournament. Simply to prove that she was ever bit a witch as anyone else. She wasn't a wallflower. She had no intention of being one. Of course, the thought of proving herself in the tournament was more amusing when she didn't have to face down a dragon.

She momentarily regretted entering the tournament, but she shook that thought out of her head, quite literally, and focused as much as she could on the task at hand.

She was starting to get nervous. Bagman was still talking about Diggory's tactics. Why the hell weren't they ready for her yet? They were probably subbing out the dragons. She was annoyed it took so long.

She was also annoyed that she had to wear a different uniform for this stupid thing. It was tight-fitting and the same blue as her school uniform, but it had a Beauxbaton's coat of arms on the chest. She stared down at the two crossed wands for a moment. She knew it said 'Delacour' on the back, but had nothing else there. Interestingly enough, it had come with a skirt, no mention of if she would have preferred pants, like the other champions.

Fleur rolled forward on her toes, bouncing slightly, waiting to be told they were ready for her. She hated it. Just let her at the damn dragon already. Let's get this stupid thing over with! Come on! She wrung her hands together, a bad habit she often did when she was nervous or unsure of herself. Her mother often scolded her for it. She'd said a young lady shouldn't give away her emotions so readily with her actions.

"Miss Delacour, they're ready for you," one of the English ministry officials next to her said. She looked over at the robed official who

gestured for her to approach the stadium. She swallowed hard and followed her toward the stadium.

The stadium was probably about half the size of the quidditch pitch. But it seemed to seat close to as many people. Fleur stepped up to an iron gate that made her feel a little too much like a gladiator going to the slaughter in the arena.

The Welsh Green waited for her. It looked rather agitated. It attempted to shoot fire at those in attendance, but there seemed to be some sort of magical barrier that prevented the fire from hitting the stands. Either that or the dragon's range simply wasn't enough.

"Ladies and Gentlemen! Our second champion is about to enter the arena!" the voice of that British quidditch player echoed through the arena. Fleur didn't know his name. To be entirely honest, she thought he was fairly annoying. But she gathered he was one of the people instrumental in organizing the tournament.

"Her opponent is the Welsh Green! As many of you know, the Welsh Green was involved in the now infamous Ilfracombe Incident! And many wizards believe that the Great Fire of London in 1666 was the result of Welsh Greens happening upon the city.

"The Welsh Green is perhaps the most at home on land of our dragons, and is considerably maneuverable, both on land and in the air."

Fleur couldn't help but laugh a little bit to herself. She had researched just about every type of dragon when Madame Maxime had revealed that dragons were the first task, so there was nothing new in the announcer's introduction. Of course, she doubted most of the crowd knew anything about dragons, and the announcing was for their benefit.

"Now!" he continued, his voice echoing through the arena. "Miss Delacour, if you please, enter the arena!" The iron gate opened and Fleur stepped confidently into the arena.

Fleur felt far less confident when the barrier between her and the dragon was gone. She stared at it for a few moments, trying to size it up, and gauge what its first move would be. She could see the

next of eggs that it guarded, and noticed one was a bright gold underneath the other large white ones.

At least they weren't real dragon eggs, she thought. Welsh Green eggs were supposed to be brown. Of course, they could simply be from another breed. Regardless, she'd do her best to not see any of them destroyed.

Her plan required her to have the dragon focused on her, and to lure it slightly away from the eggs. It would be a shame if innocent young hatchlings were destroyed because of a simple human game.

The dragon seemed more intent on focusing on the crowd, guarding the eggs from that, rather than from the only actual threat in the arena. Fleur was thankful for the brief distraction, but it would also mean that she would have to find a way to get it to focus on her, hopefully without angering it.

She took the time to survey the area around her. It was mostly a large, open area with stands built up around it. She had plenty of room on either side, which she was glad for, if for no other reason that it gave her room to run around like a fool if need be. A few rocks littered the area around. They seemed to be strategically placed, probably with the intention of being used as a place for the champion to hide.

Fleur took a few steps toward the dragon. They were soft, careful steps. She did want the dragon to notice her, but she wanted it to be on her terms. It only spared her a very brief look, as if it was accounting for her, but still felt the masses were a greater threat.

Fleur took that moment to start in with her plan. She took a very deep breath and started to focus herself. What she wanted to do would require a great deal of magic, so she gathered as much as she could around herself and continued to walk toward the dragon.

It spared her another glance. She wondered just how perceptive the creature was. Could it sense she was getting ready to wield a spell, and would it determine her as a threat? Of course, as the crowd saw her move, they cheered, which distracted the dragon once more.

Fleur sighed. That wasn't helpful to her. She needed it focused on her soon or her plan wouldn't work. She could only think of one way

to really get the dragon to focus on her. She didn't really like the plan, but it was the best one she had. She raised her right hand and pointed her wand at the dragon.

"Stupefy!" she yelled. The red jet of energy hit the dragon. It roared rather loudly, not looking the least bit phased by the stunning spell. She hadn't expected it to. The spell did have the desired effect though.

The dragon ignored the cheers from the crowd then, and focused on her. It took a few steps away from the eggs, largely to put itself in a better position to defend the next from the new found threat.

Fleur half wondered if the loud cheering from the crowd at her initial cast was because they expected her to attempt to fight the dragon. She knew that if she watched one solitary soul throw a stunning spell at a dragon, well, she wouldn't be cheering. She'd be more likely praying they didn't die.

She was distracted by that thought when she noticed the large amount of fire coming directly at her. She dove, in a fashion that her mother would probably highly disapprove of, behind one of the rocks and waited for the fire to disappear. It took longer than she would have liked.

When she was sure the dragon was quite finished shooting a pillar of fire at her she took a deep breath and stepped out from behind the rock. The dragon looked at her and growled menacingly. It retreated half a step toward the nest and seemed to think about what it should do. It had obviously noticed that fire hadn't worked, and was thinking of a better course of action. It flapped its wings once or twice. That was bad for her. She needed it on the ground.

Fleur took a step toward it and let her magic flow through her. She knew it was now or never. She took one final deep breath before she started to sing, as slowly and as lovingly as she could in the situation.

"Bonne nuit mon trésor. Ferme tes yeux et dors," she started softly. Annunciating each word carefully, every bit of her attention and her magic focused onto the dragon. After finishing, she took a deep breath and continued.

"Bonne nuit mon trésor. Ferme tes yeux et dors," she sang louder. It was a lullaby that her mother had sung to both her and her sister when they were younger. Of course, to the best of her knowledge, her mother hadn't enchanted the words as she sang. It was incredibly tiring to keep up.

The Welsh Green looked completely enamored at her words, though. Its eyes were focused on her. To her great satisfaction the lids seemed to be drooping slightly. She kept singing as she approached it, moving very slowly as to appear as unthreatening as possible. The dragon slipped out of its defensive crouch and lay down in front of the nest. It was starting to rest its scaly head on the ground. Fleur was a mere few feet away from it, but she needed it completely asleep before she could approach it further, so she continued to sing, a bit louder now.

"Bonne nuit mon trésor. Ferme tes yeux et dors," letting the magic enchant her voice was taking its toll on her. She expected she'd have a sore throat tomorrow, at the very least. But watching the dragon fall asleep in front of her very eyes was entirely worthwhile.

She walked up next to it, still singing quietly as she approached it. Very carefully she reached out and traced a hand over the scales on the neck of the dragon. It did not appear to take any notice of her. That meant the spell had to have taken hold. As long as she kept singing, which she did, quietly, it should remain asleep. She walked behind it, turning and back peddling as to not take her eyes off of it.

Fleur carefully stepped over the dragon's nest and lifted the golden egg from the nest, to cheers from the crowd. She smiled a bit but kept singing as she snuck past the beast. She sighed as she stepped past its head once more.

She took a deep breath then. Unfortunately, she stopped singing to do so. A quick snort caused her to turn and face the dragon once more, just as fire shot out of its sleeping nose. The next thing she knew, her skirt was alight. She quickly doused it and focused back on the dragon, resuming singing the lullaby as she slowly crept back to the iron gate.

Once she was outside of the arena the crowd exploded into applause again. She took a deep breath and examined the egg before a ministry official approached her.

"Miss Delacour, you're required to go to the medical area now for a quick examination. After that your scores will be displayed and you'll be taken to a reserved seating section to watch the remaining champions," the official said. Fleur simply nodded her understanding and let him lead, feeling completely relieved.

She had accomplished the first task, and done so rather well, she thought. Her throat already hurt a bit from the enchantment, hopefully the resident nurse would have something she could take. But for now she knew she had completed one of the tasks. She'd successfully outmaneuvered a dragon. How hard could the last two tasks be after that?

Two days earlier, after the match, Harry found himself in the common room, chatting idly about strategy with Fred and George. They weren't quite over the loss yet, but they were getting there.

The conversation slowly shifted to the twins plans to pursue a joke shop. Harry started to doze off, thinking about what he should do if the summoning charm failed. He half wondered if a dragon was a snake and he could simply ask for the egg. That would make the task far easier.

Harry focused back a little bit on the twins conversations. Strangely, their topic seemed to be how much they could sell their brooms for, after the quidditch tournament was up. Harry blinked.

"Wait, you want to sell the Lotus?" He asked.

"Yea," George said. "We're going to need a pretty large chunk of cash if we want to open up a shop. They're our best assets at the moment."

"What about the money you got from Bagman, didn't he give you great odds on the World Cup?"

"Yea. That still wouldn't be enough, though," Fred said.

"Regardless, the git didn't pay us," George replied.

"He didn't?" Harry asked, vaguely remembering Bagman handing over a rather large amount of golden coins to the twins.

"Well he did," Fred explained. "But he did in Leprechaun gold. It was all gone by the next morning."

"I'm sure it was a mistake," Harry said.

"That's what we thought," George responded. "But we've written to him, and we've approached him now. He completely ignores our letters and has done his best to not have much direct contact with us during the tournament."

"In other words. We're beginning to think it wasn't a mistake," Fred commented.

"We'd probably be trying harder if not for the quidditch. But that's been a blessing. We think we can sell the brooms for enough cash to get a down payment on some place, and perhaps to help us get some more supplies. Of course, they'll be worth more if we win," George added.

"Well, that seems like a fairly good idea," Harry said. He idly wondered what the brooms would be worth. There certainly weren't many of them around yet, and having been flown in the tournament would make them a collector's item.

"A joke shop?" a voice said. The three of them looked around, unsure of who had spoken.

"Did you hear that?" Fred asked.

"Yea. Who said that?" George said, looking around the common room. Harry did the same. They were alone by now, they must have lost track of time.

"Fireplace," the voice said. Harry was the nearest, he peered in and gasped.

"You probably shouldn't be here! I'm not alone!" He stated.

"Yes, but they look like two more of Arthur and Molly's boys, and I assume since you've been chatting with them for the last two hours that they're at least friendly," Sirius said from the fire place.

"Is that?" Fred stammered.

"Sirius Black?" George asked.

"Yes, but he's not bad," Harry said quickly.

"I'm sorry. But doesn't he want to murder you?" Fred asked.

"No, he doesn't. He's actually my godfather," Harry admitted. The twins looked skeptical.

"It's a confusing story," Sirius said from the fireplace. "What it comes down to is that no, I do not wish Harry any harm. One of my school friends, Peter Pettigrew, also known as Wormtail, was the one who betrayed Lily and James. He is a rat animagus, and was better known to you as Scabbers."

"Wait, Ron's rat wanted to kill Harry?" George asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I doubt it. I assume he was happy enough where he was. But when I escaped from Azkaban he had knew I'd be coming after him. That's when he started trying to escape.

"I finally caught up with him toward the end of the year. But Moony's unfortunate condition let him escape once more. I can only assume he's gone to find his master. He probably thinks that's his only refuge." Sirius explained. The twins looked at the face in the fire for a moment, before deciding to speak.

"Correct me if I'm wrong. But you just said Wormtail and Moony?" Fred asked.

"Yes," Sirius said. "They were nicknames we used in school."

"So we would be correct to assume that you are either Padfoot or Prongs?" George asked.

"I would be Padfoot," Sirius responded. "Harry's father was Prongs."

"So you're the Marauders?" Fred asked.

"The group that created the map that ruined our perfectly innocent childhood and set us off on this delinquent path?" George added. Sirius laughed in the fireplace.

"You found our old map? I thought James had it last."

"Oh yes, we found it. It's a very useful little thing. We gave it to Harry last year when he couldn't go on Hogsmead trips. We figured he could use it more than us. You have to tell us, though, how did you enchant it to work like that. We can't duplicate it to save our lives," George said. Sirius just laughed.

"You'd have to ask Remus. He and James did most of the actual magic and enchanting involved. Peter and I did most of the mapping." Sirius's fiery face had a very large smirk on it. Harry could sense that he was glad someone else had used the map for troublemaking purposes.

"Professor Lupin, really?" Fred asked. "Damn, and to think we had him at our disposal all of last year and didn't know anything!"

"Yes, what a pity," Sirius spoke slowly. Harry almost thought he was imitating Snape for a moment. "Now, you said you were interested in opening a joke shop?"

"Well, yes. That's what we want to do. Stuff marketed at students mostly. We have some things in the works. One of our favorites are these little candies that make you sick when you eat one half. So you can get out of class, then you eat the other half and you're perfectly okay," George explained.

"We also have fake wands and the like, and some other candies for simply funny situations. Things that will like, turn the person who eats it into a canary," Fred added.

"Interesting ideas," Sirius said. "All things that need to be ingested?"

"Yes. We've had the best results with those so far. We have some other stuff drawn up, but nothing that we've really had great results with yet. We were hoping to get a head start on a bunch of stuff this year, what with having the slight break between the large tests, but the tournament has interfered." Fred admitted.

"I see. And why did you choose this line of business? I can't imagine Molly and Arthur are very proud of it," Sirius said.

"Well, Mom doesn't like it at all, that's for sure," Fred said.

"Dad seems okay with it, though," George commented, mostly to his twin.

"Yea. We're interested in this mostly because Zonko's hasn't really come out with anything new in our time here. And we felt that we can produce things that are better than what they have. So far we feel we've had pretty good luck." Fred explained, suddenly getting rather serious and looking into the fire.

"Still," George adopted a similar tone. Harry was amazed at how the twins went from amusing school boys planning pranks, to businessmen. "We're going to need investors and capital before we can do much with it. We think that we can easily turn a profit once we get the infrastructure in place." Harry had never realized just how detailed their plan was. He, like Molly, had mostly written it off as a fantasy. But listening to them talk, he realized they had put a lot more stock into this than he would have given them credit for.

"Yes. I noticed that last year when I was hiding around the town. Zonko's hasn't really changed their product line since I was in school. They certainly could use some competition," Sirius said.

"That's exactly what we thought," Fred spoke. "And we also think we're more than capable of being that competition, provided we can get the needed capital."

"Well boys. I'm almost sold. I'll tell you what. For your next Hogsmead visit, give Harry here a sample of some of your better supplies. If I like what I see I'll consider being a silent partner. The Black money has been idle for too long anyway. We'll work it out in a way that you can simply pay it back to me and have everything be yours, if you like," Sirius said. The twins looked stunned.

"We appreciate the offer, Mr. Black," Fred said.

"Yes. We do. We'll make sure Harry has a sample of our best products in time for the next visit."

"Fantastic," Sirius said. "If you have anything else, like say a business plan, or future idea, of anything of that nature, I'd appreciate copy to look over. Perhaps I can help with some other things."

"We have some mail-order concepts that we are developing, if you'd like us to include that. That's about all we have going on at the moment," Fred added.

"Yes, and anything you come up with between now and then," Sirius said.

"Will do, Mr. Black," George said. Harry could already see the wheels in the twin's heads spinning. He could tell they were formulating exactly what to give Sirius.

"Call me Padfoot," Sirius said, rather automatically.

"Alright. Padfoot," Fred said hesitantly. "If we may ask, why are you being so helpful and nice? You certainly don't seem like an evil mass murderer."

"Well, thanks to Harry here I'm not a murderer. Pettigrew killed the people I'm infamous for killing. He's the only one I ever wanted to murder, but Harry made me realize just how bad of an idea that was.

"I'm helping you because I think it's a fantastic idea. The Wizarding world could use more individuals like you two willing to do things other than enter the ministry. But aside from all of that. I love to laugh and haven't done nearly enough of it for years. Everyone can always use a good laugh. And you two appear to have great potential," Sirius stated. The twins looked completely awed to be complimented by one of the Marauders.

"Wow, are you serious?" Fred asked

"If that pun was intentional, Fred, it's terrible," George commented. "But we appreciate the compliment, nonetheless, Padfoot." Fred sounded rather formal.

"Good. And I appreciate anyone interested in making mischief and getting a few laughs out of people. It is truly a noble calling." Sirius

too, sounded rather formal. "Now, away with you two so I can actually have a conversation with my godson."

"Right away, sir!" Fred said. He and George stood up in near perfect unison and exited the common room.

"They're a strange bunch," Sirius commented as they left.

"Incredibly," Harry said. "But they're good people."

"Most Weasleys are. Now. We have a lot to talk about, don't we? Care to explain how I find out in the paper, rather than from Hedwig, that you were mysteriously entered into the Triwizard Tournament?" Sirius scolded.

"Oh well. I was busy!" Harry stated, realizing it was a very poor excuse.

"Obviously. Congratulations on making the quidditch team, too. James would be proud of that. I watched the match earlier. You flew amazingly well," Sirius complimented. Harry couldn't help but feel some pride at his godfather's words.

"Krum flew better," was the only reply he could manage.

"Krum won. That does not equate to flying better. But he is the best seeker in the world, Harry. There's no shame in losing to him. Now work your ass off and get another shot at him," Sirius ordered.

"I plan on it," Harry said, rather sternly.

"Good. But that's not why I came to talk to you. Do you know what the first task is yet?" Sirius asked.

"Dragons," Harry said. "I saw them in the forest a couple of days ago."

"Alright, they likely won't make you fight one. Do you have a plan?"

"Yea. I'm going to summon my Firebolt and attempt to lure it away and out fly it," Harry admitted. Sirius laughed from the fireplace.

"You're worried about out flying Krum, and your plan is to out fly a dragon?" He asked.

"Yes, that's the gist of it," Harry admitted, looking away and thinking that perhaps he could have thought of a better plan.

"Well, if you manage that, I'm sure Krum will be even more nervous for the rematch than he is now. Do you have anything in place for if that doesn't work?"

"No, not really. Run around and hope I get lucky?" Harry asked.

"That's likely not far off of what you would probably have to do anyway," Sirius said. "I'd suggest trying to do something that would distract it. How's your transfiguration?"

"It's not bad. I get most of the things done in class. McGonagall seldom has anything negative to say about it."

"Well I would think your best bet would be to transfigure something around you into a distraction and use that to accomplish whatever you're going to attempt to do," Sirius explained. Harry had thought of that briefly, but he wasn't quite that confident in his large scale transfiguration to really attempt something of that nature. And he felt that he had the summoning charm down well enough.

"I think I'm better off trying my way. I don't know what will be in the area for me to transfigure, and I'm pretty sure I have the summoning charm down. I was going to spend most of tomorrow practicing with it," Harry said. Sirius's fiery eyes focused on him for a moment.

"If you insist, Harry. I'm just not sure how wise flying against a dragon would be. I just think you should have some type of a backup plan in case that doesn't work," Sirius said. Harry had to admit that it was probably a good idea. But still, formulating two plans seemed like a lot of extra work. Of course, he wasn't sure if his first plan would even work, so it was probably a good idea.

"Yea. Well, I'm still going to practice the summoning charm and attempt to try that first. But I'll look into some other things tomorrow, too. I'm not sure how much time I'll have to look it over, but I bet I can get some help. Hooch gave us the rest of the weekend off, so I'm sure the team will be free, and Hermione is usually willing to

help." Harry said, thinking over all of his options in his head as he spoke.

"You're as stubborn as your father," Sirius said with a smile. "He'd be proud of you, Harry."

"Thanks," Harry said, he rather liked the compliment. Something about being compared to his father always made him feel special. People just seemed to admire James. Well, excluding Snape.

"I planned on contacting Dumbledore tomorrow. But do you know if there is any news on who put your name in the goblet, Harry?" Sirius changed the subject.

"No. I haven't heard. Really I haven't had much time to think about it," he admitted.

"That's troubling. Dumbledore isn't one to not understand everything that's going on in his school," Sirius said, mostly he seemed to be thinking aloud.

"Do you have a theory?" Harry asked, purely to be privy to the musings.

"No. Just come conjectures. I know that Igor Karkaroff is a Death Eater," Sirius said. Harry was rather surprised.

"You mean was a Death Eater?" Harry asked.

"No. You do not stop being a Death Eater. Although I doubt they'd welcome him back. He turned over quite a few names for his freedom. They mutter his name nearly as much as yours in Azkaban."

"That's comforting," Harry said. Of course he preferred that they mutter his name in prison rather than in the comfort of their own homes.

"Is there anything else odd you've noticed?" Sirius asked.

"Not really." Harry responded as he thought about it. "I've seen Mr. Crouch and Professor Moody up late in Moody's office on the map, that's about the strangest," Harry joked. Sirius looked slightly

concerned. At least as concerned as one could when their head was composed largely of burning embers.

"Crouch and Moody? That's strange. They represented rather different political ideals back in the day."

"How so?"

"Well, Crouch was the one who sent me to Azkaban, without a trial. The Wizarding world was so panicked after the war that they did that to many Death Eaters. It sprung from the fact that they all used the same imperious defense, and refused to make vows or take a truth potion. Crouch had enough support to send them away without trials," Sirius explained. Harry realized he could probably do the same things to prove he hadn't entered the tournament.

But he was sure Dumbledore knew that too, and he doubted that any of the other competitors actually cared if he had or hadn't entered himself. All that particularly mattered at this point was that he had to compete.

"And Moody didn't like that?" Harry asked. "Everything I've heard about him indicates that he was rather intent on getting rid of every dark wizard he ever came in contact with."

"Yes, Moody is somewhat obsessed with that. But he's a lawman through and through. He believes that people do make mistakes, and that even he can be wrong from time to time. Albeit rarely. And he does think everyone does have the right to trial," Sirius explained. "Really, I'd have expected Moody's late night affairs to be with Dumbledore rather than Crouch."

"That's a mental image I really didn't need. Thanks Sirius," Harry said, half wanting to take the poker for the fire and gouge his eyes out. Of course, it may be more effective to gouge at Sirius with it.

"That's what I'm here for, my boy," Sirius laughed. Harry knew he had to get the subject back on track before Sirius decided to give him as many bad mental images as he possibly could.

"So you think it was Karkaroff?" He asked.

"I have no idea, Harry. But it does seem like something he would try to do, perhaps to be able to claim credit for anything bad that happened to you during the tournament. Of course, I've heard he rather likes his cushy Durmstrang Headmaster job. And getting caught interfering with the tournament would really threaten that."

"Nothing is ever easy, is it?" Harry sighed.

"No," Sirius laughed. "Nothing ever is. But speaking of easy, have you decided on your date for the ball yet?"

"My what for the what?"

"Your date for the Yule Ball. It's tradition that the champions open the ball dancing with their dates," Sirius teased. Harry's eyes widened.

"I need to find a date?" Suddenly facing a dragon didn't seem that difficult.

"Yes, apparently you do. Come on, you're famous and young. That has to count for something," Sirius continued to tease. "I'm almost surprised you don't have girls hanging off your every limb. I would have!"

"Well I've been busy!" Harry tried to defend himself. Sirius just laughed more.

"Oh Harry. No fourteen year old boy is too busy for girls. Hell, most grown men are never too busy for girls. I spent some time in Spain, France and Italy. Did my own version of Hannibal crossing the alps this summer. And I'll tell you, there was this pair at a café somewhere in Italy and just wow. Blonde and a brunette. They didn't make teenagers like that when I was in school. Those two alone made me wish I was sixteen again!" Sirius laughed more. Harry tensed. He found himself worried about who he would ask. Maybe if he could communicate with the dragon in parseltongue he'd ask it. That would certainly make for an interesting date.

"I should probably make a comment about you leering at teenage girls, Sirius. But I'll let you off easy because of the time in prison," Harry muttered.

"Oh that is so something James would have said," Sirius laughed. "But seriously now, who's, if I'm pardoned a cliché, the apple of your eye!" Harry had to think about it for a moment. Not too long ago his thoughts would have immediately centered on Cho Chang. But it wasn't Cho Chang who had her chest pressed into his back just a few hours earlier. He blushed a little bit at the memory.

"Well there's this French girl. She was my penpal over the summer. I think I'll ask her. I don't know her that well, and she's a bit older than me. She's also the Beauxbaton's champion."

"Going for the more mature witches, eh? I can't say that's a bad choice," Sirius teased.

"Yes, well. I'll probably ask her. She's never talked of a boyfriend. So maybe she'll agree to just go as friends or something."

"No no no! Don't go with that, you'll never get out of the dreaded 'friend zone' Harry!" Sirius scolded. "Go for a date or bust!"

"I'll keep that in mind," Harry responded dryly. "Of course if she says no, then I'm stuck with the same problem."

"There has to be someone else you'd consider going with," Sirius said.

"Oh yes. I'd go with Hermione, or pretty much anyone on the Quidditch team. But that would be as friends." Harry realized he'd just classified Cho as a friend rather than a love interest.

"Hmm, anyone on the team? You and Roger Davies would be an interesting couple."

"If I hit you with the poker, would it hurt?" Harry glared at his Godfather's head.

"Probably not. But let's not find out. Anyway. I've kept you long enough. I'm lucky I haven't woken the owners of this place, really. Head to bed, Harry. Best of luck with the dragons." Sirius said.

"Thanks, Sirius. You really want me to bring you stuff from the twins during the next Hogsmead visit?" He asked a final question.

"Yes. I think it could be rather fun. Their reputation precedes them. If it's as good as I hope I'll gladly front them the money. Anonymously of course. Now get some sleep!" His godfather demanded as the head disappeared from the fire. Harry sat for just a moment before groggily lifting himself up and heading to his dormitory.

His thoughts were filled with images of brooms and dragons and dates. And even a dragon in a dress acting as his date. That wasn't a very pleasant image, either. It wasn't until he put his head down on the pillow that he realized just what he had been a party to. Sirius Black and the Weasley Twins working together? Was Hogwarts really ready for that?

He fell asleep long before he could think of an adequate answer.

Fleur Delacour watched Krum's dragon as it was blindly led out of the arena. It certainly hadn't seemed happy, but Krum managed to retrieve the egg. He was lucky, though, that the golden egg appeared to be indestructible.

She glanced over at her egg. It was perched on a table she shared with Cedric Diggory, between their two seats. His egg was next to hers. The Hufflepuff champion hadn't spoken much. Fleur noticed he was sporting rather large bandage and was glad the only damage she suffered was the singed skirt. Judging by the look of the seating arrangement, Krum would wind up on her left, between another table.

Around her were people whom appeared to be sponsors and other dignitaries. They mostly left the champions alone. A few of them had questioned her and Cedric briefly, but their attentions focused mostly on the tasks.

Of course, with the way they were talking during the task, she expected that they would have a great deal more to say to Krum when he finally joined them. She saw the judges give Krum his scores. A ten from his own headmaster? That's a joke, every other egg got crushed! She crossed her arms and sulked as the crowd applauded the new leader in the standings of the Triwizard Tournament.

She could have really used a glass of wine. That would have made things more enjoyable. The officials around her were all drinking, but no one had offered her or Cedric anything as of yet.

A few moments later Krum did join them. He didn't say anything, but rather just sat next to the other two champions. One of the sponsors near them, wearing gray robes with a vaguely familiar logo on the front spoke to Krum in a language she didn't recognize. She assumed it to be his native tongue.

Fleur listened in, mostly in the hope of stumbling upon a word or a phrase she recognized. She came up with absolutely nothing, but tried anyway.

She wasn't paying attention when they brought in the final dragon. It wasn't until Bagman started to speak again that she even noticed it was protectively guarding a nest in the arena.

"And our final dragon, ladies and gentlemen! The Hungarian Horntail! A vicious breed indeed. One of these is believed to have killed five hundred Hungarian peasants before Hungarian officials managed to stop it!" Bagman yelled to more cheering from the crowd.

Fleur kept her arms crossed, starting to feel nervous for her young friend who would have to get past that beast. It was close to twice the size of her dragon. Fleur noticed the spiked tail, too, and winced a little bit for Harry.

"And now, would our final champion, young Harry Potter, please enter the arena!" Bagman shouted. There was more applause. Fleur even clapped politely. She noticed that a large section of the Hogwarts crowd, mostly those with green on their scarves, looked a tad too eager for the event. Almost like they hoped he'd fail, and fail miserably.

She sat on the edge of her seat as Harry entered the arena. He looked incredibly tiny from the distance. Well, she thought, he'd said he had a plan, time to see if it would work.

Harry stared at the dragon, slightly awed by the gigantic creature. He knew very little about dragons, but this one certainly didn't look friendly. It stood protectively over the nest, blocking the majority of it

from his sight. It had large yellow eyes that focused straight on him from the second he entered the arena.

He was momentarily awed by the beast. Part of him could see how Hagrid and others would want one. They certainly were grand creatures. And the possibilities, if you could domesticate it, seemed endless.

On the other hand, judging by the look in its eyes, it would much rather eat him than have anything to do with being domesticated. It roared rather loudly and kept focused on him.

Harry raised his wand, hoping desperately that his plan would work. The dragon tensed into a very defensive stance as he displayed his wand. Harry took a deep breath and knew that it was now or never.

"Accio Firebolt!" he yelled, pointing in the general direction of Gryffindor tower.

The only noticeable thing that occurred involved the dragon. It took him casting the spell as a form of attack and roared once more at him. But this time, she decided to accompany the roar with rather a lot of fire.

Fleur watched from afar as Harry dove behind the same rock she had used as a barrier. There was too much noise for her to know which spell Harry had attempted to use. But whatever it was, it appeared to be about as effective as her stunning spell earlier.

Harry cowered behind the rock for a few moments. Fleur could see he was thinking about his next action. She wondered, almost as much as he did, just what that next action would be.

Thankfully, they didn't have to wait long. Harry looked up from behind the rock, which the Horntail still focused on, and noticed before anyone else that his spell had worked.

Fleur turned over her shoulder and looked toward where Harry was looking. She noticed few of the people around her do the same.

"A broom?" One of the sponsors asked. He wore green robes with a yellow and green logo on the front.

"Apparently so. This should be interesting," another said. He was clad in yellow and black robes.

Fleur watched as Harry quickly mounted the broom, and shot off away from the dragon. It watched him eagerly, but did not follow. Harry turned and floated above the arena, looking at the horntail as he pondered his next move. Fleur couldn't help but think he looked quite a bit more comfortable on the broom than he had behind the rock.

"Well, Mr. Potter appears to have summoned his broom," Bagman's voice echoed through the stadium. "After what we saw a few days ago, that may be a wise move. The question now is will the Horntail take the bait?" Fleur looked over the scene and didn't think it would.

Harry had arrived at a similar conclusion as he simply hovered outside of the dragon's range. He slowly maneuvered closer to the dragon, carefully gauging its reactions as he did. The dragon merely focused on him. It appeared to be smart enough to wait for him to make a move. Or perhaps it simply didn't want to leave the eggs unprotected.

Harry decided to be a little more aggressive. He flew straight at it, pushing the Firebolt to its absolute limit. When aimed for the right side of the dragon's head, giving every indication that he was simply going to fly past it. But when he got close he abruptly cut to the right and swerved back away from the dragon. The crowd gasped. Very few of them noticed the dragon was ready to grab him out of the air had he not changed course.

Harry banked around the creature, observing it for a moment, before pulling up and out of range once more. The Horntail watched his every movement, but made no attempt to chase after him.

He circled it, watching as it circled the nest, so it always faced him in the same way. Even if he cut sharply back or changed directions, it kept its positioning.

Harry changed tactics then. He cut sharply back and dove, not on a path that would take him at the dragon, but on one where, if the horntail so wished, it could attempt to knock him out of the sky. He watched it follow him into the dive. He was lucky he saw it inhale

deeply, or he probably wouldn't have been able to pull out of the dive in time to clear the large pillar of fire.

He cut up and to his right, pulling directly over the dragon, figuring that was his best escape route. The dragon roared at him and breathed more fire in his direction, but he managed to spiral out of range.

Harry figured he was getting closer to irritating it into takeoff, so he tried the same move once more, except this time he did it even closer to the dragon. It had near identical results. He reversed and tried it a third time, moving closer to the dragon once more. Again, it reacted nearly identically, the fiery breath coming exactly when Harry expected it.

He pulled up and over the dragon again, except this time the beast had countered. He nearly flew face first into the Horntail's spiked tail. He quickly banked the Firebolt to the left and dove around the tail. The horntail swiped it back at him and he rolled around it once more. The horntail shot more fire at him, which he dodged easily.

The horntail roared once more and Harry couldn't help but laugh as he sped away from it. Had he not spent nearly the entirety of the first few months at school on a broom, he didn't think he'd feel quite the same way. And he certainly didn't think he'd have been able to dodge the tail had he not had the practice.

Still, he was enjoying himself. Something about going up against a scary beast was surprisingly liberating. He spun himself around, smirking at the dragon, and simply flew straight at it. He could tell as it lined up another shot of fire at him. He heard the gasp from the crowd as he kept flying straight at it.

He knew most of them probably didn't see him dive just under the fire. He doubted even the horntail saw that movement. He cut under its legs, right over the nest and shot underneath it. He could have probably made a play for the egg, but he didn't want to accidentally fumble it as he rushed past. He rolled around the tail, rather expertly, and cut right over above the horntail again. Its eyes found him and it roared once more.

Fleur heard laughing from next to her. She looked over and saw the two sponsors watching. The one in green was laughing.

"Holy shit just look at that kid go! It's like watching Senna drive! Just pure talent on display!" The man sounded completely astonished.

"Damn it, man. Thinking about that still makes me sick." The sponsor in yellow responded.

"Me too. But your boy got a title out of it in the Benetton. Bet you're glad it was Hill in the Williams down the stretch," the figure in green teased.

"Not with the way it came about. You know that as well as I do," yellow responded. Fleur saw green was going to say something, but she decided to interrupt.

"Excusez-moi qui est Senna?" She asked. The two sponsors paused and looked at her with complete disbelief. When one finally spoke, it was not to answer her question.

"Oh look! It's finally going to give chase!" green said as the dragon flapped its enormous wings and lifted itself into the air. Fleur gasped at the sheer size of the thing. To her right Cedric looked amazed. To her left, Krum didn't look at the dragon at all. His eyes were focused on the boy on the broom.

Harry wasted no time once it had taken off. He wasn't sure just how well the dragon would maneuver in the air, and he didn't really want to find out. He flew away briefly, hoping it follow but not looking back to check.

When he felt he'd put enough distance between him and the nest he pulled into a hard banking turn and saw that the dragon had indeed followed him. It was banking to match his turn, but he knew it had no chance. He'd put himself on the perfect line toward the nest. He pushed the Firebolt as fast as it would go, straight toward the golden egg, laughing to himself as it grew bigger and bigger.

Despite suffering no damage during the task, Harry found himself in the medical tent with his Firebolt and the golden egg. Madame Pomfrey looked him over quickly, muttering about the lunacy of bringing dragons onto the school grounds. She seemed rather determined to find something wrong with him, despite his insistence to the contrary, and his otherwise impeccable robes.

His rescue came in the form of Hermione and Ron. Once they entered the tent, Pomfrey stopped attempting to find something wrong with him. Hermione ran up to him and hugged him tightly. She started to say something, but Harry ignored her, staring at Ron instead. His best friend looked away for a moment before finally gathering the courage to speak the words he should have said nearly a month ago.

"Harry, I reckon whoever put your name into the goblet really was trying to do you in," he said meekly. Harry couldn't help but laugh.

"Ya think?" He said, still full with adrenaline from flying around a dragon. He suddenly understood why Charlie Weasley had gone into that profession. It certainly was a rush. Judging from the look on Ron's face, it wasn't the type of reaction he had expected.

"I erm. Harry, I just wanted to say that-" Ron started but Harry waved him silent.

"It's okay. I know," he said. Ron looked momentarily stunned.

"So, we're still friends?" he asked meekly.

"I don't see why not," Harry said, offering his hand. Ron shook it carefully.

"Awesome mate!" Ron said. "Let's go check out your scores!" Ron walked out of the tent. Harry noticed Hermione was staring at him, very carefully, and he simply shrugged. He knew that he would probably never be quite as close to Ron as he was in the past, but he wasn't going to simply crush his friend. He was a much better friend than that. He'd let Ron go on thinking he was still his best friend, because frankly, he didn't lose anything from that at the moment.

But Harry expected that one day Ron would again act like he had in the previous months. And he knew that this would happen all over again. But he'd deal with that when it came. He doubted that Ron would even notice the difference in his behavior anyway.

He left the tent with Hermione and walked up to see the scores from the judges. They were all good, except for the one from Karkaroff.

Harry didn't care though. He has simply wanted to survive and he had performed wonderfully.

"You're tied for the lead with Krum!" Ron exclaimed from next to him. It was strange hearing his voice after months of being ignored.

"How about that," Harry said dryly. "How'd Fleur do?"

"She's just behind Cedric," Hermione said. "She enchanted the dragon. Put it to sleep. It was really an incredible bit of enchanting. I think her score should have been higher. But she wound up putting part of the audience to sleep as well." Harry noticed Fleur and Cedric were walking off toward a tent on the other side of the arena. Krum, however, was walking toward him. When he got closer he spoke.

"Harry Potter?" he asked. Harry noticed the Bulgarian's eyes slid to Hermione, who also seemed to notice as she flushed bright red.

"Yea?" Harry asked, crossing his arms and shifting his weight a little bit. He wasn't sure what to think of the Bulgarian. His first reaction was to dislike him, as he'd lost to him at Quidditch. But of course, if that was how things worked, then he should hate Cedric much more than he did.

"You flew vell. Congratulations. I was asked to gather you for interviews," he nodded toward the tent that Fleur and Cedric disappeared into.

"Really?" Harry groaned and started to walk off toward the tent. "I hated this before," he grumbled. Krum laughed and walked next to him. He intentionally didn't look back. If Ron's new loyalty was already wavering, he didn't want to see it.

"It does not improve. They are always vultures." The Bulgarian said.

"Any advice?" Harry joked, feeling like much more of an equal than he probably was. But they had flown head to head, and they had just completed the same task, with the same final score.

"Do not let them twist vords. They vill try to get the story they vant. Be blunt," Viktor said.

"Thanks. I'll try that." Harry responded, wondering why he felt more nervous about talking to a gaggle of reporters than he did about flying against both Krum and a Horntail.

"You are welcome. Now, what is brunette's name?" Krum asked. Harry looked at him for a moment.

"The one I was just with?"

"Ya,"

"Oh, that's Hermione," Harry said, wondering what Krum's interest would be. Then again, he realized, he was in a rather similar situation.

"Like daughter of Menelaus and Helen?" Krum asked.

"Uhm. Maybe?" Harry said. Krum just nodded.

"Thank you. Harry. Now we face reporters!" Krum said. Harry could only groan as the older seeker pulled him into the tent.

Author's Note: Sorry for the lack of Harry/Fleur interaction here. I had some planned, but decided with the two days between the match and the task, they'd both be too busy. On the positive side, the next two, and quite possibly three, chapters will focus on the two protagonists. Up next is the dueling and academic competition, some pre-ball planning, with the ball finally following (likely not in the next update). Harry's date is already decided, but I'm not saying anything more than that, since it appears to be a matter of interest in some reviews.

As always, thanks for the reviews. I appreciate every last one of them. I'm still willing to add one more pre-reader before things are posted. Send me a PM if you're interested. Thanks for reading!

Chapter 10

Interlude

Monday morning came far too quickly for Harry. He rose and dressed rather slowly, debating if he would go to class or not. He could only imagine how challenging practice was going to be later, after Hooch gave them the weekend off.

Ron was waiting for him in the common room when he came down. He seemed unusually perky for the morning. Harry couldn't help but wonder if someone hit him with a cheering charm.

"Hey Harry. Want to go to breakfast?" He asked.

"Sure," Harry responded, as breakfast was his plan regardless.

It felt slightly unusual walking into the hall with Ron. He realized he probably hadn't done it since the quidditch team had been decided. He had that strange déjà-vu feeling that came from slipping into an unpracticed routine.

His eyes shifted across the hall, looking for members of the team. They had been his dining companions for the last few months, and it felt odd not eating with them. Of course, the lack of quidditch discussion would be an interesting change, too.

"You really were amazing against Krum, Harry," Ron said as they sat at the Gryffindor table. So, apparently quidditch would still be the discussion. "I thought you had him before that last turn."

"Me too," Harry said as the post arrived. He noticed an owl dropped a few papers next to Ron, who dug out a few bronze coins and paid the birds. "Developed an interest in the news?" Harry asked.

"Not really. Hermione, Lavender, Dean and I took out a few subscriptions. The birds come to whoever is here at the time. We've pooled our money for it," He explained. Of course, the explanation meant next to nothing to Harry.

"But why?" he asked.

"Are you kidding? Have you not seen these articles?" Ron asked, looking completely stunned.

"Obviously not," Harry responded dryly.

"Well, some of them are pretty good. People all over are writing about the tournament. The Daily Prophet is pretty mediocre, but Rita Skeeter writes some absurd things. Where she gets her information here is beyond me. She's taken a liking to you, though. Wizzarding News Weekly offers some fairly balanced things," Ron explained. He would have continued, too, but Harry cut him off.

"So you're reading about the tournament that's going on here?" Harry asked.

"That's what I said when they approached me about it. But it's actually pretty interesting." Ron held up a copy of Wizzarding News Weekly. The main headline was 'Durmstrang Bests Hogwarts 210-170.' Underneath the headline was a picture of the Durmstrang team mobbing Viktor Krum as he held the snitch in his hand. Harry wanted to gag at that. He should probably be over the loss by now, but it had only been three days.

"The quidditch is the bigger story?" Harry asked, assuming the rare individual competition would be the bigger deal.

"The individual stuff is below the fold. I'm betting one of the manufacturers owns a stake in the paper," Ron said with a shrug. He appeared to be lost in the article.

"I suppose that would make sense," Harry shrugged.

"It helps that Dean noticed a full page Lotus add appears in every issue, too," Ron commented. Harry couldn't help but laugh.

"Yea, I guess that would give it away. Anything interesting in there?" Harry had to admit he was rather curious. He couldn't really think of a time when people had written about him. Sure, he expected he appeared in some history texts, but not for any action he had done himself.

"It's mostly a recap of the match. Here, you may find this interesting." Ron handed him the paper. "The final paragraphs." Harry looked down at the newspaper and began to read.

But the story of the day was not Viktor Krum or the Durmstrang victory. But rather the superior play of the Hogwarts chasers, who not only scored an amazing amount of goals on a highly touted keeper prospect in Kubica, but also completely stifled the Durmstrang chaser line. The same line that many believed would steamroll the competition.

One British scout said of the Hogwarts chasers, "Any of them could play professionally if they put the work in. Their flying is incredible for their ages."

Also stealing the show, despite failing to catch the snitch, was Harry Potter. Scouts from both the Ballycastle Bats and Falmouth Falcons stated they would strongly advise scouting, and even drafting, the young seeker if he chose quidditch as a profession.

James McNeal, head scout for the Falcons and frequent contributor to the Sports section here said of Potter, "He has some of the best pure talent I've seen in years. His tactics against the Dragon were an excellent display of his skills. His last turn in the match wound up a bit wide, and it cost him. But many professional seekers have suffered the same fate against Krum."

More information on Mr. Potter's flight against a dragon can be found on page three.

Harry stopped reading then, despite the article continuing for a few more paragraphs. Harry had to admit, he rather liked the praise. He hadn't even known professional scouts were coming to the matches. He realized how silly it was of him to be surprised by that, though. Professional scouts often came to the inter-house matches to look at older players. Why wouldn't they come to a much more detailed competition?

"Falmouth and Ballycastle, eh?" Ron said. Harry, who didn't particularly follow professional quidditch, mostly because the vast majority of the season was when he was at the Dursley's, didn't know much about either of the teams. In fact, he wouldn't admit it, but he doubted he could find Ballycastle on a map.

"Yea. That's interesting," was all he could think of to say. His mind filled with thoughts of being a professional seeker. He shook them from his head though. He'd focus on getting a rematch with Krum. After that, he'd think more about whether or not he should pursue a career in sports.

"Very," Ron responded. "You coming to Charms today?"

"Yea," Harry muttered. "If Flitwick even remembers who I am." The two boys rose then, and headed to class together.

Harry couldn't help but think that the rift between them was closing. Perhaps, friendships could survive through stupidity on the part of one of the friends. After all, wasn't that the point of friendship? Still, he had more important things to worry about, so he decided he was just glad to have Ron back in his corner.

The next few days passed very quickly for Harry. He went to the majority of his classes, which was surprising, but he figured learning things would probably help him out quite a bit. After all, he doubted he could simply out fly the next task. Whatever it was.

He'd only made one attempt with the egg so far, and the ensuing headache had guaranteed that he wouldn't be making another attempt for the moment. After all he did have until February. Of course, the task was before the Beauxbaton's match, so he should think of something just so he wouldn't break his promise to Roger.

Part of him doubted that any of the tasks would be dangerous enough to actually kill one of the champions. There certainly had been a number of professionals on hand in case something happened with the dragons. But then again, people had died in the past, and safety measures sometimes simply weren't enough.

He found himself rather excited for the dueling competition that weekend, despite not knowing who would actually be participating, with the exception of Draco Malfoy. Still, despite that, he wanted his school to do well.

Then again, he was sure he'd never hear the end of it if Malfoy beat the other two schools after he lost to Durmstrang.

Much to his surprise, many Hogwarts students, including Ron, started coming to the quidditch practices again. Apparently they had put on a good enough show during the game that students wanted to see more.

Harry barely noticed the new attendees, though. He was far too focused on his own work and practice to particularly care about the audience.

But, all in all, nothing particularly major changed during the week that followed the first task. That's how Harry found himself, finishing up a transfiguration essay, on an early December weekend morning. Hermione read the essay over his shoulder as he finished it up. She had the courtesy to at least let him finish sentences before she commented. He mostly ignored her suggestions and simply kept writing.

"Come on!" Ron said as he entered the common room. "If you keep working on that all day we're going to miss the duels!"

"They're staring already?" Hermione asked.

"In a half-hour! But the Great Hall is filling up very quickly!" Ron stated. "We should head down there now if we want to get a good seat!"

"Harry has to finish his essay!" Hermione exclaimed. Harry looked up at her. He wanted to comment that he didn't, actually. He was exempt. "And you haven't even started your homework!"

"I'll do it later," Ron brushed her off. "After the duels,"

"And I'm finished," Harry said, scribbling the last sentence quickly. "So let's go."

"Great," Ron said as he and Harry started to walk toward the portrait hole. Hermione muttered something about not editing Harry's paper and followed after them.

Ron had been right. The Great Hall was already packed with students by the time that the trio entered. Harry looked around to see how the Hall had been set up the Great hall for the event. He noticed that three long platforms had been spaced throughout the

hall, with seating mixed in between the platforms. Most of the seats were taken.

"Great. It's nearly full," Ron complained from Harry's side.

"There's three over there," Hermione suggested helpfully as she nodded to the opposite corner of the hall.

"Alright, let's go," Ron said as he started to move over to the corner. Harry noticed something by the main platform though. It appeared to be three empty seats next to what appeared to be a familiar blonde and brunette.

"Wait, let's try those," he said, walking over to the seats. As he approached the blonde girl sitting near the three seats told a near slobbering boy that the seats were indeed taken.

"They're taken," Ron said, looking toward the two girls. Harry shrugged.

"Let's find out for sure," he walked up behind the girls. "Hey Lilly. These three taken?" He asked. Lilly turned and looked at him over her shoulder.

"Nope. Help yourself," she said. Harry slide between the chairs and sat on what appeared to be a simple metal folding chair. He was pleasantly surprised that the chairs must have been charmed, as it felt like he was sitting in one of the comfortable armchairs in the great hall. Ron and Hermione sat to his right.

"Thanks," Harry said, making himself comfortable in the chair. After a moment he leaned forward and spoke across Lilly. "Hello, Fleur. How are you today?" The blonde girl looked at him for a moment. She had her arms crossed over her chest and looked somewhat annoyed.

"I am fine, 'Arry, 'Ow are you?" she asked. Her voice sounding perfectly passive.

"I'm good. Just waiting to watch the duels. My friends here tell me you enchanted your dragon to sleep. I wish I could have seen that," he said. She leaned forward and looked at him from across her friend.

"I did. I 'ad not counted on it snoring, though. Lit my skirt on fire," she said, smiling weakly at him.

"I'm sorry," Harry said. "Hermione was saying she felt you deserved way more points. Enchanting a dragon must be incredibly challenging." Hermione looked over at the mention of her name before speaking up.

"Oh yes. I can only imagine how much effort that took." Fleur smiled politely at both of them.

"It was very challenging. Enchanting my own voice to 'ave ze effect left my throat rather sore. Thankfully your nurse gave me a nice tonic," Fleur admitted, looking over at the trio. "I can show you 'ow to do it, 'Arry, if you like."

"That would be cool," Harry said. She smiled at him once more. He had to admit, he knew nothing about enchanting, and it would be cool to learn something. It may even help him later in the tournament. Of course, he also thought it would be cool to have an excuse to stare at Fleur. And that wasn't just because he was still lost in her smile. Well, maybe a little bit.

"Are you free tomorrow afternoon?" Fleur asked.

"Yea, I am," Harry responded.

"Zen it is a date. Meet me at ze carriages at two," Fleur said. Harry just looked at her and smiled fully. He knew it wasn't really a date, but he rather liked the way she said it. His mind slipped to other things that could be accomplished on dates with beautiful French girls. He barely registered when Hermione spoke.

"So Fleur," his friend asked. The French girl looked over her as she continued. "What do you know of the Beauxbaton's duelers?"

"Ze team is composed of Claude Bourdais, Sophie Sinclair and Josephine Marat. Claude and Josephine are ze better fighters. But Sophie 'as incredible form and precision," Fleur explained. "And ze Hogwarts contingent?"

"Oh. It's uhm. Draco Malfoy, Cedric Diggory and Adrian Pucey. Cedric and Adrian are probably competent. I'm not sure about Draco," Hermione explained. Harry knew nothing about Pucey other than he played fairly well on the Slytherin quidditch team. He was the only member who didn't go out of his way to commit penalties. Diggory seemed to be a good choice, too. Harry knew he always put in the time and effort into any task.

"Draco Malfoy? Ze one you told me about?" Fleur asked, looking at Lilly.

"The very same. His father likely bribed Professor Snape for the spot on the team. Pucey and Diggory may have been able to train him some, but I expect he'll be outmatched. He's at least two years younger than the other duelers. And from what I hear, not the best of students." Lilly explained. "And he's also has an incredibly high opinion of himself."

"And you don't?" Fleur teased her friend.

"That's beside the point," Lilly responded quickly. The two friends continued to tease each other. Harry chatted quietly with Ron and Hermione, not really about anything important, as they waited for the duelers to enter.

"Cedric entered the competition?" Harry asked, looking over at Hermione.

"Yes, he's the only individual champion to appear. He hadn't planned on it but Flitwick asked him to," she explained.

"I hope he does well," Harry admitted, glad he could cheer for at least one of the Hogwarts duelers without feeling slightly guilty.

Eventually, the nine representatives entered the Great Hall. Harry noticed they all had uniforms similar to that of the quidditch teams, although the duelers looked to be a tad more mobile. Closer to what he was forced to wear for the individual task. He noticed the only two female duelers, both from Beauxbatons, wore skirts.

He also noticed, much to his dismay, the completely smug expression worn by Draco Malfoy. He appeared as if he was looking down his nose at everyone. Like he expected this to be easy. Draco

was also the only dueler to be wearing a 'C' on his chest. At least Cedric and Adrian seemed to be far more focused.

"Welcome to the dueling portion of the Triwizard Tournament," Crouch announced. Harry was rather surprised that Bagman wasn't doing the commentary for the duels. Then again, Harry realized, there would likely be simultaneous dueling, so he wasn't even sure if there would be a commentator.

"Today's round of dueling will commence with a student from Hogwarts opposing a student from Beauxbatons. After that the contestants will alternate until each has completed six duels against six different opponents. The dueler with the most wins earns one point for his school. If there is a tie, each dueler earns a point for their school. The school with the most wins also earns one point. The points are cumulative through all three sessions of dueling. The school with the most at the end will be declared winner," Crouch continued, explaining everything rather methodically.

"Duels will be refereed by officials from the school not involved in the duel. I myself will be officiating all Beauxbatons against Durmstrang duels. Duels will last until one person is disarmed or ruled unable to continue. No recovery potions are allowed during the duration of the contest

"Mr. Malfoy and Miss Sinclair have agreed to open the dueling. If you two would please step onto the middle platform. You may begin when instructed by the official," Crouch said. Harry watched Malfoy and a very slender brunette witch step onto the center platform. Each of them took a spot at one end.

Harry noticed Draco took the end closer to where the duelers had waited, making the French witch walk the length of the platform, past the Durmstrang official. Personally, Harry would have let her have the closer end. But perhaps he was just too chivalrous for his own good. Or maybe he just hated everything Malfoy did, and simply didn't want to think he would ever act that way.

His eyes followed the French duelist as she walked down the platform. Sophie didn't seem too extraordinary. She was very thin and very small. Harry couldn't help but think she had a seeker's build. After she stopped and turned back toward Malfoy, the Durmstrang official spoke.

"Please keep the duel clean and within the rules. Duelists are given one warning, then a second will result in forfeit of the duel. Please bow." Malfoy did, curtly. The French girl curtsied. "And you may begin!"

The French girl didn't move. She looked noticeably less tense than Malfoy, her expression completely unreadable. After a few seconds of standoff, Malfoy made the first move.

"Stupefy," he pointed his wand and shouted. Sinclair stepped to her side and carefully dodged the spell. Her skirt swished just a little bit as the magic flew by. Malfoy paused for a moment before trying another spell.

"Diffindo!" He yelled. The spell had the same effect. Sinclair moved just a tad to her side and seemed to wait for Malfoy to do something more. He paused and tried once more.

"Reducto!" Again, the girl simply stepped away from the spell.

"What's she doing?" Harry asked to no one in particular.

"Malfoy is leading his spells," Lilly responded.

"What?" Ron asked.

"Ze boy is pointing his wand shortly before casting. She knows where ze spell is coming," Fleur explained quietly.

"Oh I see," Harry said. That made sense. He wasn't sure he would have thought about it if he were dueling. "Where do the spells go after she dodges them?" Harry gazed around the great hall, wondering where the magic had disappeared to.

"The platforms are surrounded by a nullifying field. Nothing done inside of them can pass through the field, nothing we do can penetrate it. I've been told in some professional duels, the field also reflects spells, making it more hectic," Hermione explained.

"Well Malfoy is lucky that it isn't here," Harry commented.

"Yes, he is. Although, he's only casting one spell at a time," Hermione said. "It's like he expects her to just get hit and fall over. He can't be that dumb."

"No, but he is that arrogant," Ron added. Hermione couldn't help but agree.

"He should probably have attempted to learn nonverbal spells, too," Lilly added.

"Oui. Zis is going to be over quickly once Sophie decides to fight back," Fleur commented. Harry couldn't help but feel bad for Draco. He knew that was rather silly of him, as if the situations were reversed he knew Malfoy would insult him to no end about it. But still, it was clear Draco had no idea what he was getting involved in. He tried a few more spells, but the French witch easily dodged all of them. After a few minutes of fighting, she had yet to even cast a spell.

That changed, though, after Malfoy tried another cutting curse. She shielded it causing a blinding flash of light as the curse impacted on the magical barrier. Sophie Sinclair then stepped forward, walking slowly up the platform. She cast one spell that looked to be a cutting curse to Draco's left. The Slytherin looked rather surprised and jumped to his right, straight into Sophie's bludgeoning curse. Harry couldn't help but wince as Draco went down like a sack of bricks.

"Hogwarts, can you continue?" The Durmstrang official asked. Sinclair walked back to her end of the platform, as if she wasn't interested in his response.

"Yes," Draco muttered as he rose to his feet.

"Alright then. Resume," the official said. Almost as soon as the words left his mouth Sinclair went right back onto the offensive. She hit Draco with a cutting curse that he obviously wasn't ready for. Draco gasped only to take another bludgeoner square in the chest. He collapsed to the platform and again Harry couldn't stifle the wince. The official walked over toward Malfoy, kneeling next to him. He cast a quick first aid spell before standing.

"Hogwarts unable to continue. Winner Beauxbatons," there was applause from across the hall. Harry noticed many of the Hogwarts

students cheered as well. He simply clapped politely. Adrian Pucey walked over and helped Malfoy back toward where Pucey and Diggory watched the duel. The elder Slytherin cast a spell that cleaned the blood off of Malfoy's uniform.

"Maybe he'll think before he whines to his father next time," Ron laughed. "Of course, he probably doesn't even realize that he never even had a chance."

"I dunno," Harry said. "I feel bad for him."

"Why?" Ron asked. "He deserves it."

"Still. It could be a very long day for him. I mean, I know it's his own fault for entering, but it's going to be painful if he loses every match like that." Harry leaned back in his chair and looked back toward the dueling platforms. He knew Ron was staring at him with an expression of complete disbelief, but Harry didn't care.

He heard Fleur say something in what he assumed was French to Lilly, although it sounded slightly off. He gazed over at the girls and noticed Fleur was also eyeing him carefully. He looked away and leaned over toward Hermione.

"What are they talking about?" He asked quietly. Hermione shrugged.

"I don't know. I don't speak Italian," she responded.

"Oh," Harry said. Feeling rather stupid for not recognizing the language, but he had little experience with languages in general. But the second duel was commencing, so he focused his attention on the Durmstrang and Beauxbaton's students who started to battle.

The rest of the day continued in that fashion. Harry chatted idly with his friends between the matches. And, toward the end of the day, during the matches as well. As the duels finished up he found himself mostly speaking with Lilly about quidditch strategy. They both tried to convince Fleur to give them tips on how to defeat the Beauxbaton's team, but she merely gave them an appraising look and went back to watching the duels.

The highlight of the day had been Cedric Diggory dueling Claude Bourdais. The duel had lasted nearly a half hour and employed bits of magic Harry hadn't even realized existed. The amount of light and magical energy that radiated through the hall during that duel had been simply amazing.

Diggory had eventually won with a well placed disarming charm through the French wizards onslaught. They shook hands as Diggory returned the wand. Anyone could tell from just looking at the two competitors that they each couldn't wait for the next chance to duel.

Unfortunately, that duel also directly led to one of Malfoy's two wins. He faced a severely winded Bourdais after nearly an hour of rest. Both of Malfoy's wins came from being considerably more rested than his opponent. Harry had to admit, as he watched the French wizard put up a very good fight, that it was probably the best way to use Malfoy if the team wanted to win. But despite the obvious difference in skill, it was easy to see that Diggory had taken the last of Bourdais's energy, and as a result Malfoy earned the win.

It seemed each team was going to exit the first round with a point. Cedric and one of the Durmstrang duelers finished the day with the best record, each going five and one in their duels. Bourdais would have also had that record, had he not lost to Malfoy in his final match.

But Beauxbatons wound up with the best overall record, thanks to superb dueling from all three of their duelists.

Harry thought the duels themselves were rather anticlimactic. He realized about halfway through the day, that he would much rather watch a quidditch match than duels. But that was just him. Plenty of students seemed enraptured by the fighting.

Ron being one of them. He talked of nearly nothing but the duels for the rest of the evening. Of course, most of the students did. Ron; however, simply couldn't stop talking about how one of the Durmstrang duelers had simply completely embarrassed Malfoy.

Harry simply couldn't bring himself to find that quite as humorous as his friend did. Sure, he had laughed while the Durmstrang dueler

held Malfoy upside down in the air, but it had been strangely reminiscent of the World Cup. And again Harry simply felt that even Malfoy didn't deserve to be that embarrassed in front of the entire school.

Part of him, although it was a very tiny part, was glad that he had at least won some matches, rather than just get trounced in all of them.

While Ron continued to discuss the duels, he worked on his defense homework. It was a rather basic essay and he found he cruised through it without much difficulty. It was something that Moody had covered with older students earlier in the year, and Harry had been there when Roger explained it to Malcolm in the locker room. Hermione didn't even offer any corrections on his work as he wrote. In fact, he was pretty sure she pulled out her own essay and added one or two of his points to it.

After he finished that he decided it was late enough to turn in for the night. After all, he did have to wake early and go for a run. He'd been a little lazy with his workouts in the last few days, and deemed to rectify that.

As he walked up the stairs he remembered he said he'd meet Fleur too, the next afternoon, so he crawled into bed with visions of what he could do on his pseudo-date with Fleur. Not really caring that most of his visions were completely impossible.

The next day Harry found himself waiting in the chilly December air outside the carriage. Again, he was fifteen minutes early, so he simply stared at the lake and waited for Fleur to show up. Part of him hoped he'd get another nice comforting hug.

"Arry!" A voice sounded behind him. He turned over his shoulder and saw Fleur near the entrance of the carriage, wrapped in a shawl. "It is freezing out 'ere! Come inside!" she ordered. He laughed a little bit and walked slowly over toward her.

"It's not so bad. I've played quidditch in worse," he said.

"Zat may be true, but get inside," Fleur demanded, leading him into the carriage.

Once again he had to admire the capabilities of magic. Upon entering the carriage he found himself in a large foyer that would have seemed much less out of place in Early Modern France. It was absolutely gigantic.

"Wow," was all he could say as Fleur led him through the first level, into a small, private room with an ornate table, two chairs and a fireplace.

"It is something, is it not?" she said, sounding quite proud of her institution. She took the chair closer to the fire.

"Yes, it is," Harry admitted. Fleur smiled politely at him.

"Merci. Now, is zat ze only clothing you have?" she teased, and gestured to his practice uniform. He was still wearing it, having not changed back into his clothing after his little morning routine. Of course, the practice uniform was probably cleaner than his normal clothing.

"No," he laughed. "But it's warm and I do have practice later."

"I see. 'Ave you eaten?" she asked.

"No," Harry said. "I did a morning workout and then came back here. I was going to get lunch, but I wound up helping a teammate with her transfiguration homework."

"I shall have some food brought then," Fleur said, relaxing into her chair. Harry sat in the other chair and looked at her. The meeting felt entirely too tense. Like neither of them were particularly sure how to act around each other. Fleur summoned an elf with some rapid French.

"They let you summon the elves?" Harry asked when it left.

"Oui. Ze older students at Beauxbatons are allowed certain privileges. 'Owever zey are 'eavily monitored in case of abuse." Fleur explained. "Now tell me, ze friend you were helping, is she cute?" Harry wasn't sure what to say. He thought about it for a moment. He hadn't really considered Ginny that way before. He wasn't sure how to answer. He decided to be honest.

"Yea, she's fairly pretty. A year younger than me though, so you know."

"Oh?" Fleur raised an eyebrow. "Prettier zan I?" she asked. Harry couldn't tell if she was teasing or jealous. Of course, the thought of Fleur Delacour being jealous struck him as incredibly odd.

"No. She's not," Harry admitted. When Fleur laughed and gave him her full smile he figured he'd answered correctly.

"You are very kind," she responded as the elf popped back into the room and placed a few dishes on the table that separated the two of them. Harry's eyes gazed over the table before he spoke.

"What did you ask for?" he asked. The elf immediately left the room after it had placed the dishes.

"Nothing too special. Some bread and cheese and whatever else zat would be dinner tonight. It looks like ze elf decided to get more creative. He brought some Provence style tomatoes, zose are one of my favorites. Oh and zat appears to be a risotto with some chicken worked in. Another of my favorites," she said, pointing to the few things on the table.

"Well it smells fantastic," Harry said, acutely aware that the only thing that he could really smell was the risotto.

"It does," Fleur said, lifting herself out of her chair. She took one of the plates and daintily placed a few chunks of bread and some cheese on the plate. After, she picked up a fork and added some of the tomatoes, before finally spooning some risotto onto the plate. She then carefully placed a fork on the corner of the plate before stepping over toward Harry and handing him the plate.

"Oh. Thanks," Harry said, staring down at the food.

"You are welcome," Fleur responded, while she took the other plate and gave it much the same treatment. She sat back down, carefully holding the plate, and began to slowly eat the risotto. Harry looked down at it. It just appeared to be a soupy rice with bits of chicken worked in. He carefully put some onto his fork and brought it to his mouth, completely unsure of what to expect. He took a first tentative

bite, then immediately scooped more onto the fork and ate it. It didn't take him long to decide he could eat an entire vat of the stuff.

"Wow that's delicious," he said, spearing a piece of chicken from the rest of the risotto and eating it quickly.

"I am glad you think so," Fleur said with a full smile. If Harry had been looking directly at her he would have easily been enthralled. Instead, he was looking at his food, and was only almost enthralled. He tried one of the tomatoes next, and enjoyed it just as much.

"You always eat stuff like this?" he asked.

"Oui. Ze elves 'ave different preparations very often. French, Italian, and Spanish cuisine appear ze most often," Fleur explained. Harry couldn't help but be slightly jealous. Sure, there was always a variety of different things to eat at meal times at Hogwarts, but there was nothing like this.

"It's no wonder you don't like the food we have here," he laughed.

"It is not zat I don't like it," Fleur stated. "It tastes fine. It is just very bland and too meaty," she frowned, as if she wasn't getting her point across the way she wanted to.

"Oh it's alright, you can admit you hate it," Harry laughed, spreading some cheese onto a piece of bread and eating it quickly.

"But I do not 'ate it," Fleur said diplomatically. "Beef stew is good on very cold days."

"Yeah, so is this risotto," Harry laughed.

"Yes, it is," Fleur responded. She looked at him for a moment before speaking. "You really did fly very well in ze first task, Harry. Ze sponsors were most impressed."

"Thanks," Harry responded. "It was actually kind of fun."

"Fun? You did look like you were enjoying yourself. But you found flying against ze dragon fun?" She seemed a little bit shocked by that.

"Yea. It was just a big spiky opposing seeker," Harry joked. Fleur continued to look at him in disbelief.

"You cannot be serious," she said flatly.

"Well, mostly. I was scared to death at first. Scared that my broom wouldn't come. Scared that the dragon would destroy it before it got to me. Scared the dragon would have no problem swatting me out of the air. But once I finally got into the air and flew around it a bit, well, that all left," Harry explained. "I suppose the easiest way to explain it is that I simply didn't have enough time to be afraid."

"You are very brave," she said.

"Oh I don't know," Harry responded, modestly. "My friends call me recklessly stupid. I suppose it's a form of bravery."

"You are too modest," she said. "You are much braver than I. I was afraid of the dragon the entire time. Zey said you fought a basilisk?" She said.

"Yea. I did," Harry blushed and looked down. Eating his last piece of bread and cheese as he did. He didn't particularly want to go into detail about that. He doubted she'd believe him anyway.

"How did that come about?" she asked, leaning forward a little bit.

"It's a long story," he sighed. "There was this thing called the Chamber of Secrets," he started, but Fleur interrupted him.

"Lilly told me about that. Students were petrified by a monster, she said."

"Yea, they were. Hermione figured out what it was. She was petrified, though. And the Heir of Slytherin took a student into the chamber. That student was my friend Ron's sister, Ginny. We found our defense professor at the time, Professor Lockheart. He turned out to be a total sham, but anyway, we found the entrance to the chamber and headed down.

"That's when we found out Lockhart was a fraud. He wound up taking Ron's wand, and started to go into this long tirade about how he was just going to take our memories and leave three bodies for

the monster. Escaping with his reputation intact, and probably a new book deal. But his plan backfired. Ron had broken his wand earlier in the year, and the spell wound up hitting him rather than us. I'm not sure whatever happened to him, to be honest." He explained.

"Zat is terrible!" Fleur said. "Mr. Lockheart was never very popular in Europe. But Lilly mentioned him a couple of times in letters. Even before he was a teacher. She said he struck her as more of a Shakespearean actor more than a professor," Fleur said.

"I'm not sure if I can see that," Harry admitted. "Although, I've never seen a Shakespeare play."

"You should, zey are usually wonderful. My favorite is As You Like It," she said. "Now continue with your story!"

"Right away, Ma'am!"

"Do not call me zat! I am not old enough to be a ma'am!" She scolded, giving him a faux expression of anger. "Mademoiselle if you must be formal. But just stick with Fleur!"

"Right away, Mademoiselle Fleur!" Harry said quickly, laughing slightly as she rolled her eyes at him. "But anyway, to make a long story short I wound up separated from them with the Heir of Slytherin and the basilisk. I didn't really do much, Professor Dumbledore's phoenix showed up and saved my life, as well as blinded the beast. Eventually I killed it and destroyed the Heir of Slytherin."

"You killed a man?" Fleur asked, looking stunned, although she did not look judgmental. Her expression would have been best described as concerned.

"Well. I don't think so," he explained, momentarily forgetting about Quirrell. "He was like a ghostly projection from a diary. And I destroyed the diary with a basilisk fang and after that he died and Ginny woke up. I'm not really sure of the exact details," Harry admitted. Fleur raised an eyebrow and contemplated that for a moment.

"Strange. I wonder what ze item was. Something strong enough to project a human-like image, able to act on its own? Zat had to be a

very powerful dark object," Fleur said. "At ze very least I am impressed. Perhaps you are far more deserving to be in zis tournament zan ze rest of us."

"Well regardless," Harry said, wanting desperately to change the subject. "My friends said you did an incredible job on the first task. I wish I could have seen it. I don't know anything about enchanting," Harry said.

"It is not too challenging. But it requires a lot of magical power to sustain ze enchantment, as I did. It is easier to enchant items rather zan creatures. It requires an incredible amount of power to make ze enchantment permanent. It is why most items have runes carved into zem," she explained. Harry couldn't help but be enraptured. He half wanted to tell her she would be a good teacher. But he realized he probably would have spent more of class simply staring, as opposed to listening.

"I see, but how does one do it?" he asked.

"It depends on what zey wish to do," she responded. "If someone is enchanting a item zey need ze item. Zey zen find ze spell zey want and carefully cast it around ze item, as close to it as possible, gradually getting closer until it imbues into ze item. See, in theory it is not hard," she explained. Harry was already pretty much lost, but he didn't want to let Fleur know that.

"It makes sense," he said. She smiled at him.

"Oui. But with a creature it is different. See, what I did with ze dragon was different. Instead I channeled my magic through myself," she explained.

"How?" Harry interrupted. Fleur looked at him for a moment. She looked both slightly annoyed that he had interrupted him, and rather happy that he was interested.

"You will learn zat later in school. It is not very difficult. Like meditation or focusing. Zere is very little use to it unless one is casting a larger, challenging spell," she explained.

"Okay," he said. "Now go back to what you were explaining about the dragon."

"Ordering me around already, 'Arry?" Fleur smirked at him, tilting her head to the side. He made the mistake of looking right at her as she moved and found himself wondering what he had done. He'd upset her. He didn't want that. Apologize now!

"No, I erm." He didn't know what to say, her sharp laugh brought him back to reality.

"Zat is okay, 'Arry. It is cute," she said. That made him feel a little bit better. "Now. As I was explaining. I channeled my magic through myself. From zair I focused on a sleeping charm and my own throat and words. As I sang I focused ze spell onto my words as well. When ze dragon heard the words, ze spell started to effect ze dragon. Eventually, it fell asleep. I put a few of ze closer audience members to sleep as well. And I doubt it was very fun watching." She sighed. He thought, for a moment, that she was second guessing her strategy.

"Oh that's nonsense. I bet you're a great singer and that the crowd was given a treat!" Harry said. The French witch gave him her usual polite smile. It told him she could tell he was simply being nice to attempt to cheer her up, and that she appreciated it.

"I am a much better dancer zan a singer," She admitted with a smile. The reference to the dancing made him remember something he'd been meaning to do for a few days. He wondered if it was a subtle hint on her part. That would be almost too good to be true. Of course, he hadn't expected the gigantic lump that just appeared in his throat. And he was a bit surprised that he had suddenly forgotten how to speak.

But after just a brief moment, he worked up the bravery, or perhaps reckless stupidity, to

"Speaking of dances. Would you be interested in going to the ball with me, Fleur?" he asked. She looked at him for a few moment, as if she hadn't heard him right.

"What?" she asked, immediately making him feel like a complete and utter fool. But he had never given up after one attempt before. Perhaps she had simply heard him wrong.

"The Yule Ball at Christmas. Would you like to attend it with me?" he asked. She immediately frowned.

"I am sorry, 'Arry," She said. "You are a little young for me. But anyway, I 'ave already agreed to go with one of Lilly's friends so she would not 'ave to," she said. Harry thought that was a weak excuse. He did his best to not seem too disappointed. He knew he certainly didn't appreciate being called a little young for her.

"Oh. It's okay. I just thought you may not have had a date. Not that you probably have an issue with that. And I figured I'd offer. Not out of pity or anything, because I'd really like to go with you but you know because it could have been fun," Harry rambled. Fleur smiled politely at him again.

"I appreciate ze offer and ze sentiment behind it, 'Arry. If I 'ad not already made the promise to my friend, I would carefully consider it," she took on a rather polite tone, as if she didn't want to hurt his feelings. He smiled anyway, simply because he couldn't think of anything better to do.

"I'm glad you have a date," Harry said, before he realized how stupid that sounded. As if Fleur would have struggled finding a date. "Hopefully you'll save me at least one dance?"

"I would be honored to," Fleur responded with a smile. As she finished speaking the clock struck four. Harry groaned.

"It's four already?" he asked. Fleur looked over at the large, ornate, golden clock above the fireplace.

"It appears to be," she responded. "Is zat a problem?"

"No. I'm just going to be late for practice," Harry said and stood up. Fleur stood with him.

"Alright," she said, sounding slightly disappointed. "Zis was fun though. We should do it again?" she asked. For a moment Harry thought she may have been worried that he hadn't enjoyed himself.

"Definitely!" he responded enthusiastically. "Especially if you can gather up some more of that risotto."

"Zat can probably be arranged," she laughed, smiling fully at him again. He wished he didn't have practice. He would have rather stayed with Fleur.

"I really enjoyed myself, Fleur. Thank you." He reached out and hugged her rather tightly. Mostly just to initiate contact with her. He inhaled her wonderful flowery perfume as she hugged him back. After a moment he let go.

"I enjoyed myself as well, 'Arry. Good luck at practice," she smiled. And with that, he stepped out of the Beauxbatons carriage and headed toward the locker room.

When he finally made it back to the common room that night he had decided on another girl to ask out to the ball. He just had to work up the courage to ask again. Funny, how he still felt nervous at the thought. Rejection certainly wasn't pleasant. Even though he was accustomed to it from the Dursleys. Still, he'd never really put himself out to be directly rejected like that before. It was a strange feeling.

He sat down on the floor of the common room and leaned against the chair where Hermione was working on some bit of homework. Ron was sprawled on a couch and also working on an assignment. Hermione was the first to notice he arrived.

"How was your day?" she asked politely, without looking up from her homework.

"Not bad. I met Fleur for a bit. I asked her to the ball," Harry recounted carefully. Ron laughed a little bit.

"You asked the Veela chick to the ball?" he asked, too loudly. Some people in the common room turned to look at him.

"Yes I did," Harry said curtly, glaring at his friend. "After I had lunch with her."

"What did she say?" Hermione asked.

"No of course," Ron laughed before Harry had a chance to reply. Harry wanted to make a comment that he had a much better chance

of doing anything with Fleur than Ron ever would. Not to mention he wanted to punch his friend for referring to her as 'the Veela chick.'

"Ron," Hermione scolded, and then waited for Harry to answer.

"He's right. She said no. But only because she's already agreed to go with someone else," Harry said.

"Who?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know. She didn't say. Just one of Lilly's friends," Harry said.

"I don't like that Sesion," Ron interjected. "She seems rather pretentious." Harry just shrugged. He couldn't really argue with Ron there, but she was incredibly nice to her friends. So rather than respond he found a stray bit of parchment and started to work on the short assignment Flitwick had given them for the week. He figured he could fake getting a start on it until Ron went to bed. He didn't have to wait very long.

"I'm tired," his friend said. "I think I'm going to head to bed." Ron yawned rather obnoxiously as he finished speaking. He stood and worked his way up to the dormitory. When he was out of earshot he worked up the courage to ask a second girl to the ball.

"So, Hermione. Would you be willing to accompany me to the Yule Ball?" he asked slowly, and probably far too formally, as he took Ron's spot on the couch. She looked up at him.

"What, I'm just your second option, Harry?" she asked. Harry opened his mouth, but no sound came out. He wasn't sure how to reply to that.

"No. I..erm. If you don't want to... you're like my sister. I figured we could go as friends...only if you wanted of course," he said quickly. Hermione shook her head and smiled at him.

"I would have loved to, Harry. I was waiting for you or Ron to work up the courage to ask me. But I have also agreed to attend with someone," she said.

"Ron worked up the courage to ask you?" He was curious. The rejection hurt considerably less coming from Hermione than it had from Fleur.

"No," Hermione laughed. "He seems to be under the delusion that whoever he asks will just be thrilled to go with him. So he's waiting for the last minute."

"Well, maybe he'll get lucky. Who are you going with then?"

"Viktor Krum," Hermione said. Had the quidditch star not asked for her name before thrusting Harry toward the throng of reporters, he would have assumed she was joking.

"Wow, he works fast," Harry said. Hermione raised an eyebrow at him.

"What do you mean?"

"He asked me who you were after the first task, when he took me to the reporters. How did he ask you?"

"Well, he spends a lot of time in the library. It's actually a bit irritating as his fan club follows him around and it interrupts my studies. But today, actually, he just walked right up to me and asked me out. I guess that explains how he knew my name."

"Yes it does. Well, I hope you have a great time," Harry said. And it was true. Hermione deserved that. He should have known someone would beat him to asking her out. He laughed a little bit when he realized Krum beat him at two different things in the span of a week. No wonder he was the international star.

"So who are you going to ask then?" Hermione asked. "Someone on the team?"

"Probably. I'll ask a few of them tomorrow. Ginny or Cho are probably my best bet, wouldn't you think?"

"Probably," Hermione agreed.

It took him a few more days before he found what he felt was the proper opportunity to ask some of his teammates to the ball. Most of the team was in the locker room after the morning workout. Harry turned to the pretty brunette who sat in her locker next to his and asked.

"Hey Lilly. I was wondering, do you have a date for the ball?" He figured he'd take that approach, rather than ask directly. Lilly barely paid him attention as she serviced her broom.

"Yes. My boyfriend is coming up for it. I heard you asked Fleur. I'm sorry she was already engaged," Lilly said. "Do you even know how to dance?"

"Erm. Not really, no." Harry admitted. He realized that could be a bit of a problem. But it was a problem that didn't last long.

"Cho and I are giving Malcom and Titus lessons after practice tonight. You should probably stay too. I'll ask one of the other girls to stay after, too." She said.

"Thanks" Harry responded. After that he stood and walked a few lockers down. He was going to ask Alicia, but he saw her and one of the Weasley twins snogging under a tree the day before, so he assumed that wasn't an option. Cho was showering and changing into her practice uniform, so next up was Ginny. He smiled at her when he approached.

"Hey Ginny. Would you like to go to the ball with me?" he asked. Ginny's face lit up for a moment, but only a moment. After that she frowned a little bit. Strangely, her frown reminded him a bit of Fleur's reaction. He knew the answer before she even spoke.

"I would have loved to, Harry. But I've already agreed to go with Neville. In fact, he asked me shortly after the ball was announced. I'm sorry." She truly looked it too.

"Hey, no problem. You two should have fun. Neville is a good bloke. Would you mind staying after practice and helping me learn to dance? Apparently Lilly and Cho are giving Malcolm and Titus lessons."

"I'd love to, Harry."

"Great, tell Lilly, that way she won't ask someone else to come," Harry said. Ginny nodded and trotted off toward the other alternate captain. Cho took that moment to emerge from the changing rooms.

"Hey Cho. Do you have a date for the ball?" Harry asked. The pretty Asian witch nodded.

"Yes. I'm going with Cedric. Why?" she asked.

"Because Harry here seems to have the absolute worst luck when finding a date," Titus said from his locker just a few feet away. Apparently he'd heard Harry's measly attempts at locating a date.

"Oh. I'm sorry," Cho said. Harry was growing rather sick of having girls apologize to him for no reason. "I know a few younger Ravenclaws that may not have a date. Would you like me to find out?" She asked.

"If you would, that would be great," Harry admitted.

"Great, I'll get back to you." She went to examine the bristles on her broom. She'd given Harry an idea, though.

"Thanks Cho," he responded before turning to the Slytherin beater. "Hey Titus?"

"Sorry Harry," Titus interrupted him. "I'm already going with Tracey. And you're not my type."

"You're not my type either, Titus. Can you think of anyone else for me to ask?" Titus just shrugged.

"One of Tracey's friends was complaining about being forced to attend with someone she couldn't stand. I wasn't particularly paying attention at the time. I could ask her about it and get back to you?"

"Thanks," Harry said.

"No problem, man. I have to admit, watching you get rejected by everyone is a little bit sad. I'll let you know tomorrow. And since I feel bad for you, I won't try to kill you in practice today," the Slytherin teased.

"You couldn't hit me anyway," Harry said. He went back to his locker to look over his broom a bit before practice. Fleet and Davies were having issues with the twigs on theirs, so everyone was keeping closer watch on their own. He couldn't see anything wrong with his.

So his thoughts shifted back to the ball. He was starting to worry. Finding a date shouldn't have been this hard, right? Especially not for one of the champions. No. He knew thinking like that was wrong. If someone only wanted to go to the ball with him because he was one of the champions, well then they weren't the girls he wanted to go with.

Of course, if this stupid rejection streak kept up he may not have a choice. Still, only Fleur's initial rejection had actually hurt. The rest had simply been, well, inconvenient. For lack of a more appropriate term.

"Alright, we have the pitch now, let's go!" Roger said as he entered the locker room. Harry picked up his broom and walked out toward the pitch, pushing the thought of being a champion without a partner as far out of his head as he could.

Author's Note: I don't really have much to say about this one. The chapter itself marks the halfway mark with how I have things planned. That is, of course, subject to change.

Up next is the Ball, which is the one chapter/scene I've been dreading having to write, so we'll see how that goes.

Nothing much else to say at this point. I am starting to kick around some other ideas for fics, mostly that deal with post-Hogwarts life. But I wouldn't expect anything to appear very soon. I like to focus on one thing at a time.

Anyway, thanks for the reviews, I appreciate all of them. Hope you enjoyed the update.

Chapter 11

Yuletide

Break came quickly, which Harry was glad for. Still, he made no further headway on the dating front. He would have been more worried, but a few Gryffindor girls had offered to go with him if he couldn't find a date. Harry didn't really want to accept any of those offers, but if he had to he would.

He'd asked one other girl. She was a Ravenclaw and had been suggested to him by Cho. She'd been, well, strange to say the least. She'd told him that she appreciated the offer, but she was vacationing over the holiday with her father instead. Harry couldn't help but think she was probably one of the only students actually going home for the winter holiday.

Still, she was pretty, in a young and innocent sort of way. But she was slightly unusual. He hadn't been able to tell if she was making up most of the things she said. But he wasn't going to worry about it more than that.

He was on his way to watch the Beauxbatons against Durmstrang match that highlighted the start of break. He, Roger, and Lilly had planned to observe it from a coach's perspective, to learn everything they could about both opponents in preparation for their match against Beauxbatons at the end of February. The rest of the team was getting a well deserved day off.

Of course, Harry expected that just about all of them would be watching the game. But they would simply choose to do it with long neglected friends and girlfriends.

He was walking quickly toward the pitch, as bundled up as he could stand to be, knowing it was incredibly cold outside. He was about to wrap a scarf around his neck when he heard his name called.

"Hey Potter!" he turned to see Titus Button standing by a few Slytherins. Harry walked over toward them.

"What's up, Titus?" He asked. He noticed that a few of the Slytherins weren't giving him the nicest of looks. Titus had his arm around

Tracey Davis's shoulder. Harry couldn't help but notice that her expression indicated that she wanted absolutely no part of him.

"Roger wanted you to meet him and Lilly outside the locker room," Titus said. Harry looked at Titus for a moment. He already knew that. He and Roger had discussed that earlier. He knew that Titus had to be going for something else.

"Yea, I know," Harry said dumbly. "I was heading there now."

"Oh. Okay. That's good," Titus responded with a goofy smile on his face. Harry raised an eyebrow and stared at the beater.

"Yea. I take it you're heading out to the game?" Harry asked. It wasn't that telling of an observation as they were all heavily dressed and one of the girls filled out a woman's Krum jersey rather nicely.

"Yea. Heading out there now. Walk with us for a bit?" Titus asked, turning himself and Tracey toward the entrance hall. Harry shrugged. He noticed that a few of the Slytherins with Titus didn't seem to think that was such a great idea. Harry didn't really find it to be all that great of an idea, either. But they were going in the same direction.

"Sure," he said, falling in step between Titus and the girl in the Krum jersey. They walked down the hallway in near silence. Harry could sense that the Slytherin students were only tolerating his presence because Titus had invited him. Still, he had to admit, it was strange. A year ago, even under an invitation, Harry wouldn't have gone near a pack of Slytherin students for fear of his own personal safety.

But he knew Titus. He'd grown to like him in the last few months. Of course, he didn't see Titus as a Slytherin anymore, but rather a teammate. Really, the same could be said about every member of the team. He knew Titus was rather laid back and focused. And, despite not being a starter, he knew Titus wanted Hogwarts to win the tournament as much as anyone else on the team. And as such, he certainly wouldn't let anything happen to the star seeker.

Of course, the team had played perfectly well without him in the first match, so perhaps he gave himself far too much credit. But he had flown toe-to-toe with Krum, and that had to count for something.

"So Harry?" Titus asked, knocking Harry out of his daydream. "Did you ever find yourself a date for the ball?"

"No. I haven't agreed with anyone yet. Some older Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors asked me, but I think they simply want a date with a champion."

"And there's something wrong with that?" Titus laughed.

"I guess not," Harry admitted with a shrug. "But you know, being used always feels strange." The girl next to him scoffed. Harry turned to look at her, but was distracted by Titus speaking.

"Yes there's that. In fact, Daphne here found herself in a similar conundrum. Wasn't it, Daphne?" Titus asked. The girl next to him glared at the elder Slytherin.

"We don't need to talk about that, Titus," she said coldly.

"Oh come now," Titus laughed. "You were just bitching about it a few minutes ago. What's the difference now?"

"We don't need to involve a Gryffindor in Slytherin arguments," Daphne said, rather sternly.

"I don't see a Gryffindor here," Titus responded. "I see a bunch of Slytherins and a school champion."

"A Gryffindor school champion," one of the other Slytherins said.

"If you insist," Titus shrugged. "But Daphne here is wearing more red than he is."

"It's a different red," Daphne spat.

"Red is red. Anyway, why don't we see if Harry here can provide some insight into your problem," Button asked.

"Slytherins take care of their own problems." Another of the students said, rather sternly.

"Yes, but we've failed rather spectacularly at that. All we've done is divide our already divided house. Perhaps we should look for a

slightly less biased opinion?" Button asked. Harry wondered what the issue could be.

"He's not unbiased. He hates Malfoy," another student said. It dawned on him just what the issue could possibly be then.

"Fine. Maybe Potter can help. Maybe he won't just laugh at us." Daphne crossed her arms as she spoke. They were in the entrance hall, heading outside and toward the pitch. "You see, Potter. Darco is rather insistent that his cronies have dates. Millicent agreed to go with Vincent and Draco wants me to go with Gregory," Daphne said.

"And you don't want to go with Goyle, I take it?" Harry asked. Not quite seeing what the problem was.

"No. I don't. But Draco has seen to it that no one else asks me, leaving Goyle my only option if I wish to have a date for the ball."

"No one else will ask you?" Harry asked.

"No one else has," Daphne responded. "I've been waiting a few weeks. Only a few people in Slytherin will even talk to me. Our house is more inclusive than the other three, in case you haven't noticed. Ever since his father bought those brooms Draco has had rather exalted status."

"Well, there's an easy solution to all of this," Harry said.

"Oh and what's that?" Daphne spat. "Just don't go? That's what the rest of the house said. Except Titus over there who said I should go and ask just about anyone else out of pure spite." Titus made a noise Harry could only assume was agreement while continuing his conversation with the other Slytherin students.

"I guess that's a possible solution," Harry said. "But it wasn't the one I was going for."

"Oh, and what one were you going for, Potter?" she asked.

"Well, Daphne. If you really wanted to anger Malfoy-"

"I don't want to anger Malfoy. I just don't want to go to the ball with Goyle. I thought that was obvious."

"Well, regardless. If you don't want to go to the dance with Goyle, then go with me," he said. She looked at him, and then started to laugh. It was certainly the most unique reaction he'd seen.

"What?" she asked, fighting back laughter. "You want to go to the ball with me?"

"Sure, why not?" Harry responded.

"Because we don't like each other?" She stated.

"Oh please, we don't know each other well enough to know if we like each other or not," Harry commented. He thought it was a clever sentence at least.

"So you want to go to the ball with me?" Daphne asked again. She looked rather startled by the entire thing.

"Yes, we've been over this," Harry responded dryly.

"Why me though?" she asked.

"Well, you're pretty. I don't know you that well so it would be interesting. And as a Gryffindor I would be completely shunned if I didn't attempt to disrupt Malfoy's plans," Harry admitted. He noticed Daphne blushed slightly when he called her pretty. "Oh and my friends say I have this uncontrollable urge to help people."

"So you're just using me to annoy Draco and because you feel sorry for me?" she asked angrily.

"Not really," Harry admitted. "I need a date. Frankly, you're a better option than most of the girls who have asked me of late. So we'd be using each other. If I'm not being too arrogant here, I would like to at least think I'm a better choice than Goyle." Daphne paused and sized him up.

"Can you even dance?" she asked rather snottily.

"I'm learning," Harry responded. "And I think I'm competent now."

"Well fine, ask me again, more formally," Daphne commanded. Harry raised an eyebrow and looked over at her.

"Will you, Daphne Greengrass, attend the Yule Ball with me this coming Christmas night?" he asked, trying to sound as formal as he could.

"I'll think about it," Daphne said. Harry opened his mouth to comment, and then closed it, staring at her for a moment before actually formulating his next sentence.

"But you just said," he stammered, feeling slightly annoyed now.

"I told you to ask me formally," Daphne responded. "I gave no indication that my answer would change." The exited out toward the grounds then. Harry pulled his cloak tighter around him.

"Shit it's colder than I thought," Button said. Harry had momentarily forgotten he was walking with a group of Slytherins.

"Yes. I'm going to freeze in this," Daphne scoffed. "Thanks for the accurate weather report, Titus. I thought you said you were out earlier."

"I was," Titus laughed, pulling his own cloak tighter around him. "It got colder."

"Here, take this," Harry said, pulling off his cloak and scarf and offering them to Daphne. She looked rather surprised.

"You'll freeze then," she said.

"Nah. I have an extra in the locker room. It's lighter, but I'll be fine," he explained. She didn't take much more convincing as she threw his cloak around her shoulder and started wrapping the scarf around her neck.

"Okay. Thanks, Harry," she responded awkwardly.

"No problem. I have to go though, locker room is over here," he said, walking toward that path while the Slytherins continued toward the pitch. He'd only taken a few steps when she called after him.

"Wait, Potter!" Daphne shouted over the icy wind.

"Yea?" Harry turned to look at her.

"I'll do it. I'll go with you. Meet me in the entrance hall before the ball," she said. Harry smiled a bit at her.

"Alright. I'll do that. I look forward to it, Daphne." He turned and walked toward the locker room before he could see her reaction. It was cold, after all, and he really wanted his spare cloak.

He barely found Roger and Lilly before the match started. They'd obviously decided to not wait for him outside of the lock room. He'd missed the player introductions while he searched for them.

"Where were you?" Roger asked as Harry walked up next to his two teammates.

"Getting myself a date for the ball," Harry said.

"And how'd that go?" Roger laughed as the players started to line up for the game.

"Splendidly," Harry said. "Except I had to bribe her with my cloak and scarf, so I went to the locker room to grab another one."

"Good. I don't need you getting pneumonia on me, or something absurd." Roger teased.

"Who are you going with?" Lilly asked.

"Daphne Greengrass," Harry responded.

"A Slytherin and a Gryffindor? That sounds like a bad romance novel," Lilly laughed.

"Yea, a bit. But she got out of her date with Goyle by going with me," Harry said.

"Well, you're certainly better looking," Lilly commented.

"Less talking, more watching," Roger said as the match commenced. Harry watched the red robed chasers quickly take the quaffle, go right down the pitch, and score easily. Harry blinked.

"That certainly looked easy," he commented.

"Yes, it did," Roger responded. One of the Durmstrang chasers stole the quaffle on the inbound from Beauxbatons and put it right through the hoops again. "And so did that."

"Yes, are these the same chasers we outplayed?" Lilly asked.

"Yea, they are," Roger responded. "They've been practicing rather hard though. Wonder how much they've improved?"

"Well either we're exceptionally good, or they improved a lot," Harry commented as Durmstrang scored again. "Who's Beauxbaton's keeper?"

"Bloke named Bourdais, one of their duelers, I believe." Roger commented.

"His positioning isn't horrible. They're just not doing anything in front of him," Harry commented.

"They certainly aren't. But they're doing fairly well now. They've kept it in the Durmstrang zone for a while," Lilly commented.

"All passing though. They haven't even tried to get a shot off," Roger said.

"Yea. And Durmstrang is using the same defense they tried against us. It appears to be working here, though," Lilly said.

"At least better than it did against us," Roger commented.

"Yea. The Beauxbatons seems to be stalling," Harry said.

"I'd agree. Not sure what the merit to that strategy is when you're losing. I doubt that they expect their seeker to beat Krum," Roger said.

"Probably not. It certainly doesn't help that she's just trailing him like Lynch did during the World Cup," Harry responded.

"Yea. I bet that ends pretty poorly," Lilly commented. "Durmstrang really needs to get their beaters involved. They're not even attempting to pressure the Beauxbaton's chasers right now."

"Yea, but the Beauxbaton's chasers aren't even attempting to score right now, so I'm not convinced that the Durmstrang team really cares," Roger commented.

"Maybe not," Harry said. "But it could be a strategy. Lull them for a bit and then drive the hoops." It turned out that may have been the Beauxbaton's team's plan. As nearly as soon as Harry said that, the French chasers pulled a quick passing move that left Krum well out of position and scored their first points of the game.

"Good call, Harry," Roger said. "Let's see if they can play anything resembling defense now." Turned out, they couldn't. The Durmstrang team went right down the pitch on the inbound and scored again.

"Guess not," Lilly commented. Beauxbaton's looked rather rattled. They went to inbound the quaffle and once again Durmstrang stole it easily and scored. The Beauxbatons team was visibly shaken then. They took their only time out and circled toward their coach.

"This match is over," Roger said.

"It's still very early," Harry commented.

"Yes, it is. But they're completely outclassed and shaken. They'll be better when they play us, I would imagine. But for now, they're outmatched. The only question is how long will it take for Krum to find the snitch." Roger sighed.

"Still, we may as well scout them the best we can," Lilly responded.

"That's what we're here for," Roger agreed. Harry simply kept watching as the teams resumed play. Beauxbatons managed an inbound pass without losing possession. They slowly moved down the pitch. Durmstrang didn't particularly challenge them.

Harry could tell that the Durmstrang team simply felt the match was over as well. They knew they were better than the Beauxbatons contingent and had decided to not show anything for the rest of the match.

"Yea, they're just using basic defenses now," Lilly commented.

"And I'm sure their offenses won't be any better for the rest of the match," Roger added. Harry watched in silence as the Beauxbaton's team managed another shot. Kubica saved it and tossed it to Petrov.

"You're right, attack patterns don't get more basic than that," Lilly commented as the Durmstrang team moved down the pitch. Harry watched as the Durmstrang chasers quickly out positioned the Beauxbatons ones. Petrov had a very nice chance for a goal, but it was batted away by Bourdais.

Roger and Lilly kept talking, but Harry paid them little heed. They'd all come to the same conclusion. Barring a miracle on the part of the Beauxbatons seeker, the match was over. Harry figured he could better spend his time scouting his direct opposition.

"Who is the Beauxbaton's seeker?" He asked when he noticed that

"Sophie Sinclair, the duelist," Roger said. Harry nodded a little bit. He vaguely remembered thinking she had a seeker's build. Apparently he'd been correct. He found her in the sky easily enough. But after watching her for just a few minutes he could tell he wouldn't learn much about her style. She was simply following Krum and was probably lucky that he hadn't decided to pull off a feint.

His glance shifted to Krum as the Durmstrang seeker cut back across the stands. He'd probably be able to learn more focusing on the professional. Krum seemed to be fully focused on getting to the snitch. He was not trying to distract opposing players, or even bring any attention toward himself. He flew in quick, fluid circles around the pitch, allowing him to survey every inch of it from multiple angles.

Harry let his eyes gaze around the pitch as well. He ignored the actual action and attempted to find the snitch. Perhaps he'd be able to better determine when the match would end if he could spot it. Of course, he also wanted to see how long he could follow it for when he wasn't chasing it.

He wasn't sure how long it took, but he eventually found it.

"Snitch is by the left Beauxbaton's hoop," he said. After a moment Lilly responded.

"Yes, it is, there, just above the hoops," she said.

"I see it," Davies said. "Looks like Krum sees it as well." Krum, who had the optimal line anyway, was speeding down the pitch straight at the snitch. It made a feeble attempt to cut to the right, but the little golden ball never really had a chance.

Christmas day came quickly then. Harry wrote a quick thank you note to Sirius for the rather handy looking knife. He assumed it would be useful in the tasks ahead. Or at least make sneaking around the school at night a tad easier.

He realized he should probably explore more. He hadn't been nearly caught outside of bed once this semester yet this semester. That had to be a record for him. Hell, he'd barely had time to look at his map.

He even took a minute to look through the book Hermione had bought him. Of course, that was likely because the book was about quidditch teams. Of course, like the previous books she'd gifted to him, it just happened to be in French. Oh well, maybe that would make him practice more.

At the very least, he learned where Ballycastle was. He also deciphered a brief history of both the Bats and the Falcons. He decided he'd rather play for Ballycastle, if given the opportunity. But that was getting rather ahead of himself.

After he'd finished opening his presents he decided to go on a morning jog. The other Gryffindor fourth years looked at him like he was insane. When he was finishing up a giant snowball fight appeared to be forming on the grounds. Harry joined one of the sides but didn't put too much effort into the match.

Most of the girls left in the early afternoon to get ready for the ball. Harry trickled inside later when the rest of the crowd gave up on the match and headed back toward the dorm.

Ron was already there, cutting lace off of his robes with his wand. His friend looked rather focused, and rather annoyed. Harry vaguely remembered overhearing Ginny and the twins laughing about how bad Ron's dress robes were. Harry felt bad for his friend. He found his own dress robes folded neatly at the bottom of his trunk.

"So we're flying solo, then?" Ron asked, laughing a little bit as Harry started to change.

"What?" Harry asked, not quite getting his friends meaning. Of course to use 'we're' and 'solo' in the same sentence just seemed slightly off.

"We're both going without dates. Hermione refused to go with me when I asked. Said she had another date. I think she's making it up, though, because she wouldn't tell me who she's going with." Ron said. Harry blinked a little bit as he pulled on his robes, adjusting them to fit better as he did.

"She's not. She has a date," Harry said. Ron looked at him.

"Is she going with you?" he accused.

"No, she's not. But I know who she's going with," Harry said.

"Who?"

"It's not my secret to tell," Harry said. Ron just glared at him for a few moments. Harry finished dressing.

"Well at least we'll hang out all night then," Ron said. Harry fixed his tie in the mirror before he spoke.

"I have a date, Ron," he said. "And I've promised dances to a bunch of people."

"What, who? And since when do you know how to dance?"

"I took some lessons," Harry said. "And you'll find out, I suppose. I have to go meet her now. See you later, man." He left the dorm before his friend got a chance to comment further.

"Potter, champions and their dates are lining up over there!" Professor McGonagall said as he entered the entrance hall. "You do have a date, don't you?"

"Yes, she's meeting me here," he responded, moving over to wait where she had told him to. So far, the only other champion there was Krum, who waited patiently in the corner. He nodded briefly at Harry, but otherwise just looked surly as per usual.

"Nice match against Beauxbatons," Harry said, mostly to create a conversation. Krum looked at him for a moment before speaking.

"Thank you. They were not very good. We shall see you in the finals," Krum said rather sternly.

"I hate to jinx it, but I hope so," Harry said.

"Practice hard. Do not get lazy and you will not jinx it," the Bulgarian said. Harry was going to comment, but Hermione entered the hall at that moment and walked up to Krum. Harry couldn't help but think she looked gorgeous. He took a step away from the couple, not wanting to impose.

Cho and Cedric came down next. Harry thought Cho looked nice too. But as he stared at her he realized his crush was gone. Yes, Cho was very pretty, but he wasn't particularly interested in being the one who escorted her. He felt no jealousy toward Cedric. He gave them each a kind nod as they walked past.

All that changed a moment later, though, as Fleur entered the entrance hall on the arm of Roger Davies. Harry felt his fists clench and his throat tighten. His chest constricted and for a moment he had difficulty breathing. Fleur looked stunning in silvery-gray robes that perfectly complimented her figure. She'd done her hair up and was wearing very little makeup. Harry noticed pretty silver earrings and a pretty silver necklace as well.

He also noticed she seemed far too interested in her conversation with Roger. Way more interested than she should have been. They both walked past him without seeing him, which hurt. Harry suddenly found himself hating Roger, something he hadn't ever before. Every fiber of his being wanted to strangle the captain, to simply make him

go away. Roger looked like he felt far too lucky, too, as he gazed at Fleur in ways Harry thought he shouldn't be allowed to.

Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath, attempting to calm himself. He knew he had no real ill will toward Roger. He'd treated him with nothing but respect and had been incredibly helpful.

He noticed McGonagall was looking at him strangely. He was the only champion not ready. She looked annoyed, like she wanted to start the ball, but couldn't because his date had yet to arrive. Other students were already filing into the Great Hall, but the champions remained outside.

Harry couldn't help but wonder if Daphne stood him up. Had the whole thing simply been some ploy to embarrass him? Well if it was, it was working.

"Potter, over here," he heard a voice say. He turned and saw her then. She wore a gold dress that accentuated her form much better than the Viktor Krum jersey had. She had short, matching gold heels on, a couple of gold bracelets on her right wrist, and a thin gold necklace. Her dirty-blond hair was done up in a loose bun. She'd let some strands of hair fall down to frame her hazel eyes. She looked very nice.

"Daphne. Please call me Harry, though. If I'm called Potter all night I'll likely think I'm being attacked. You look fantastic," Harry said with a smile. She laughed a little bit.

"Thanks. You look rather nice yourself," she admitted.

"Better than Goyle?" Harry teased.

"Considerably," she responded dryly as McGonagall rushed over. She looked at the two fourth years for a moment. Her expression was unreadable, but Harry could tell they ranked rather high on a list of surprising couples. Well, assuming she kept such a list.

"Champions this way," she said. "Line up behind me, walk straight down the aisle and take seats at the table in the middle. You'll be joined by some judges and sponsors. The meal will commence before the ball." The champions did as she asked. Cedric and Cho led the way into the Great Hall and to the table. Harry and Daphne

sat next to each other, near Hermione and Krum. The others sat further down the table. They were joined by a few of the sponsors. Harry recognized only one. He wore green robes and the same logo that was on Harry's tournament broom was plastered onto his right breast. Dumbledore started the feast by demonstrating how to order and soon the hall was filled with noise of people eating and conversing.

"So how did Goyle take it?" Harry asked, attempting to create some sort of a conversation with Daphne. She shrugged and daintily cut up a piece of chicken.

"Well enough, I suppose. I didn't tell him who I was going with, just that it wasn't going to be him. I'm sure I won't hear the end of it tonight." She speared the piece of chicken with her fork and brought it to her mouth.

"Well I hope they don't give you too much grief," he said honestly, cutting up his own food as well.

"At the very least I should be able to walk tomorrow," she said.

"What?" Harry asked, finding that to be a very strange statement.

"I'm assuming you'll be much kinder to my poor feet than Gregory," she responded. Harry couldn't help but laugh.

"I certainly hope so," Harry said. They continued to chat, not really about anything in particular. After a few moments of conversation the sponsor leaned over and spoke.

"Harry, excuse my interruption. I don't believe I've been introduced to your friend here," the sponsor said. Harry didn't believe he'd been introduced to the sponsor, but he let that slide.

"My date is Daphne, Daphne Greengrass," he said. Daphne gave the sponsor a quick nod.

"I'm Lewis Harris. Formally of Team Lotus. I was one of the designers of the broom you're flying in the tournament," he said. Harry nodded a little bit.

"Cool," he didn't know what else to say, "It flies well. I appreciate it."

"I'm glad you think so. Are you familiar with Team Lotus?" Harris asked.

"I'm sorry. I can't say that I am," Harry admitted.

"Ah. I thought being raised by non-magic types you may have some familiarity. We compete Formula One races," Harris said.

"Oh. I've watched a couple of those," Harry said. He vaguely remembered a Lotus car, although he couldn't remember if it ever performed well. Nor did he particularly care.

"Oh? Are you a fan? Team Lotus appears that it will be losing the grid spot for this upcoming season, but I could certainly arrange for you to be a guest at one of the races," Harris offered. "The British Grand Prix is shortly after the end of your term. We could shuttle you and your family out to Silverstone, if you like."

"Uh, we'll see," Harry said. And, while he was amused by the idea of telling the Dersleys' he'd received a free trip for his family to a race, he doubted it would go over well. And he was wondering where this conversation was going.

"Yes. But some of the sponsors and myself were wondering if you would be willing to do a favor for us, Harry," he asked carefully. Harry raised an eyebrow.

"And what's that?" he asked, trying to sound as skeptical as he could.

"Well it isn't much. It looks like my partner at Mercedes is already speaking with Mr. Krum about it. I'm sure my partner at Renault will approach Miss Sinclair tonight as well. Since the first quidditch matches have been played we'd like to get three players to give a comparison of the brooms. We figured it would be excellent PR for all of our companies," Harris explained.

"So what, you want the seekers to race each other?" Harry asked.

"No. We'd just like you to come out to the pitch this upcoming weekend and fly around on each of the three brooms. Then we'd just like to get some comments on the brooms as a whole. One of

the quidditch periodicals will publish something about it," Harris explained. Harry couldn't help but think it sounded fun.

"Alright. I'll be there," Harry said. Harris thanked him and went back to his meal.

"You must get that a lot," Daphne said, carefully eating the dessert sundae she had ordered up.

"Not that often, really. That's the first time I've ever been asked to do something. It sounds fun," he admitted.

"They're using you, you know," she commented as she sucked a bit of chocolate syrup off of her spoon.

"How's that?"

"They just want you to say some good words about the brooms. They're trying to establish themselves in a new business, publicity from you and Krum will sell a lot of brooms," Daphne commented. "You should have had him pay you."

"I...erm. I never thought of that," Harry commented.

"Well. Whatever you do, Harry, make sure you get a good agent," she teased.

"Know anyone?" Harry laughed.

"No, but if I find someone, I'll make sure to let you know," she said. "Now the dancing is starting." Harry noticed that the other students were all starting to rise. The champions were heading over toward the center of the dance floor.

"It is. Well, Miss Greengrass, may I have the first dance," Harry joked.

"You may, Mr., Potter," she responded, taking his arm and walking with him to the dance floor. Harry couldn't help but notice the stares from just about everyone in the hall. He'd certainly surprised a few people with his choice of a date. Even Malfoy just looked on completely aghast. The best part was that the Slytherin couldn't think of an insult that didn't demean one of his housemates.

When they arrived in the middle of the dance floor he took her hand, placing his other on her waist. They started to move slowly with the music. He led her gently across the floor. Daphne looked pleasantly surprised.

"You're not bad. Whoever gave you lessons certainly was competent."

"I'm glad you approve." They danced mostly in silence then. Harry kept his eyes focused on her, mostly out of fear of accidentally being caught looking at another girl. He certainly didn't have much dating experience, and he didn't expect a relationship to develop between he and Daphne, but he still knew looking at other girls would be bad form. At the very least he'd want her to enjoy herself.

As he spun around the floor with her he noticed Ron sitting alone at one of the tables. Ron's eyes shifted from Harry to Hermione, his expression indicated he felt betrayed by both of his friends. Harry felt bad for him, but couldn't say that he hadn't brought it on himself.

He turned Daphne so he wouldn't have to look at his friend. Of course, that put Fleur in his line of sight, so he shifted her once more until he could see Crabbe and Goyle. The sheer look of confusion on Goyle's face as he stared at Daphne was one of the funniest things Harry had ever seen. He smirked a tad and kept dancing.

Soon other pairs joined in the dancing. He continued to lead Daphne around the dance floor as he gazed at the other couples that occupied it. He looked at the other couples that swarmed onto the dance floor. None of the couples really surprised him.

He may have been biased, but he felt that He and Hermione had snagged the least likely dates. His gaze slid over Lilly, who wore a violet dress and danced with a tall, tanned guy who appeared to be too old for her. Seeing his teammate reminded him of a promise he'd made though.

"I hope you don't mind, but I did promise a few dances to some other friends tonight," Harry said quietly speaking just over the volume of the music.

"Trying to get rid of me already, Harry?" Daphne asked. Her lips curved up into a smirk.

"Of course not," Harry responded quickly, feeling flustered.

"Don't worry about it," Daphne said. "I didn't expect to have your undivided attention the entire evening. I'll make do. But I do want the last dance." Her voice was rather stern.

"It's yours then," He responded. They danced for another song, twirling through the crowded dance floor. They didn't say much, both of their gazes wandered around the hall, looking at other couples. Harry was just happy that he managed to correctly lead her around the dance floor. And that he never once stepped on her feet.

Harry noticed that he finished the dance next to Krum and Hermione.

"May I borrow your date for a dance, Viktor?" He asked. The older player looked him for a brief moment.

"Yes, but I will want her back," Viktor said. Harry nodded and took Hermione's hand, as Krum took Daphne's. The next song started as he led his friend across the dance floor.

"Having fun?" he asked her.

"Yes, you?" She responded, grinning at him.

"Yes, Daphne has been great," Harry said. "We haven't really talked about much, though."

"Either have Viktor and I. One of the sponsors wouldn't stop talking to him over dinner. I think he almost hit the man," Hermione laughed.

"Yea, I had one talking to me too. You know, it looks like our other friend isn't having that great of a night," Harry nodded over Hermione's shoulder, and then spun them so she was facing toward Ron.

"Well he should have been more proactive. I heard him ranking girls based on their looks in the common room the other night. I'm glad he didn't find a date," Hermione said coldly.

"He can be a bit of a jerk. You'd think having that many older brothers would have been a tad more humbling," Harry commented.

"Yes. But Daphne Greengrass, Harry? How did that happen?" Hermione asked.

"Titus set us up. Apparently her options were Goyle or me. I'm just glad she picked me," he laughed.

"Well you do look quite nice tonight, Harry," Hermione said. "Certainly considerably better than Goyle."

"Thanks. You're looking rather nice tonight, too. Do I want to know how long the hair took?" He teased.

"No, you don't," she said flatly. "But if you look, Pansy is completely ignoring Malfoy and staring at Daphne with Krum." Harry turned them until he saw that.

"She is. Looks like she wants to stab my date," Harry commented.

"And steal mine," Hermione added.

"How serious is that?" he asked, knowing she would know he meant her relationship with Krum.

"I don't know. We don't really know each other. Probably more serious than you and Daphne, but more than that I can't say."

"Well he seems like a good bloke. He certainly can fly."

"I'm not sure his quidditch playing ability has much to do with determining if he's good or not," Hermione commented.

"Well it may not have any effect, but it certainly doesn't hurt. It looks like he wants you back, though," he said as he noticed Krum and Daphne moving back toward them. They switched partners flawlessly and Harry found himself staring into Daphne's hazel eyes as she spoke.

"Try for your dance with Seslion next," Daphne commented.

"My what?" Harry asked.

"Well I'm assuming you're going to dance with her, being teammates and all. And if I dance with her date I'll dance with the three best quidditch players here," she commented. Harry looked over toward Lilly, wondering who her date was.

"Are you complimenting me, there? Or did you have a third player in mind?" Harry laughed.

"Complimenting you. But don't let it go to your head. I'm sure I have a 'Potter stinks' badge somewhere I could wear," she teased.

"Please don't," Harry said. "Who is her date anyway, I don't recognize him."

"Diego Langes-Piquet. He's a chaser in the European leagues. Won the league MVP this last year for a Greek club. And he's only like nineteen," Daphne said. "You really don't follow professional quidditch do you?"

"I spend my summer with Muggles," Harry laughed. Daphne didn't seem to find that a satisfactory answer, but she chose not to comment.

"Regardless, dance with her next," she ordered.

"As you wish," he responded, smiling and shaking his head. He moved over toward Lilly and found his chaser teammate in his arms for the next dance.

"Sorry," he laughed. "But my date wanted to dance with yours."

"It's okay," Lilly started to lead the dance, obviously not thinking Harry was good enough to let him lead. "You are quite a bit better than when we first practiced."

"I had a good teacher."

"And complimentary, too. Daphne is very lucky," she said.

"I don't think Daphne and I are going to be very serious," he responded.

"Really? You make a cute couple."

"You think so? Regardless, I'm interested in someone else." He tried his best to not let his eyes wander to Fleur. He failed. The French girl was dancing with the French keeper, Bourdais, while Roger looked on, rather angrily.

"Ah," Lilly said, seeing where Harry was looking. "Good luck with that." She didn't sound like she was really wishing him luck.

"No advice?" Harry asked.

"I don't think she's your type. You'd be better off with someone younger and not a Veela," Lilly said bluntly.

"Are you serious?" Harry said.

"Yes," Lilly responded. "Especially for your first. Go after someone easier." Harry didn't really like that answer. But he tried his best to not let it show.

After the song ended he again danced with Daphne. She was rather flushed and giggly.

"So that Piquet was charming, I take it?" He laughed.

"Uh-huh," she admitted. "Thanks for letting me do that."

"You're welcome," Harry said, not realizing he'd had a choice in the matter. He noticed most of the couples were filtering off of the dance floor to get something to drink. He wasn't the least bit winded, which he knew he owed to his training, but he figured he should ask his partner. "Would you like a drink?"

"Please," she responded, taking his arm as the dance finished. They walked over toward the tables where drinks were being served. Harry noticed most of the students appeared to have wine and not the usual pumpkin juice. He took two glasses, handing one to Daphne before sipping his own. It was very diluted.

Daphne sat on a nearby bench, Harry moved to sit next to her.

"I should have worn different shoes," she joked.

"I can't imagine wearing heels," Harry said as Viktor and Hermione approached them. Hermione sat next to Daphne as Viktor spoke to Harry.

"You going to fly for the sponsors?" he asked, rather bluntly. Harry had a feeling he was not a man of many words.

"Yea, I am. It sounds fun. Are you going to?"

"Yes. Agent would be disappointed if I did not," Viktor admitted.

"I'll see you out there then," Harry added. Viktor nodded.

"Hey Harry!" He turned and saw Ginny smiling at him. She wore a pink dress and looked rather nice. He also noticed Neville was winded and taking a large drink. "Can I trouble you for the next dance?" Harry looked over at Daphne, who appeared to be receiving lecture from Hermione. He didn't have time to answer the question, though, as Krum put a hand on his back and pushed him toward the younger girl.

"Don't make pretty witches wait," he heard Krum say from behind him.

Harry managed to not fall over as he took Ginny's hand and moved back to the dance floor. He led her carefully through the slow song.

"Having fun?" he asked. She nodded rather enthusiastically.

"Yes. You could have probably done better than a Slytherin, though," she said. "Ron is very unhappy with you and Hermione. He thinks you're both being conned by the enemy."

"The enemy?" Harry asked with a laugh. "And Daphne has been great."

"Apparently all non Gryffindors are the enemy. And are things serious with the two of you. I wasn't aware you were even friends?"

"We weren't really. I don't think things are that serious."

"That's good," Ginny said with a full smile. Harry was going to comment that she'd just made fun of her brother for considering opposing houses the enemy, but the song ended and Ginny scampered away with a quick excuse that she wanted to try to dance with Krum as well.

Harry walked back toward his date. He noticed Hermione was still lecturing Daphne, who looked rather annoyed by it. He also saw that Roger and Fleur were standing near the drinks table. Roger was talking animatedly about something. Fleur didn't appear to be paying attention. Harry walked up to them.

"Can I have the next dance, Fleur?" He asked. She looked at him.

"Oui," she said quickly. Harry doubted she even knew she slipped into French. Harry offered her his hand, and she took it, quickly. She hurried away from Roger and back onto the dance floor. She took the lead in the dance as soon as the music began.

"You look stunning tonight, Fleur," he said, letting her lead the dance. "Are you enjoying yourself?" She took a deep breath before speaking. But it didn't matter, she still sounded annoyed.

"Yes. Ze ball 'as been fun," she said curtly.

"Your tone indicates otherwise," Harry said calmly. Fleur looked at him, almost like she were stunned someone would simply not believe what she said without question.

"Roger is a bit trying," she admitted, carefully weighing her words as she spoke.

"I'm sorry about that," Harry said.

"It is not your fault," she said quickly.

"Regardless. I still rather you enjoyed yourself," Harry said. Fleur smiled weakly at him.

"When I am 'aving fun, I cannot control my aura as well. Too much fun ultimately leads to unwanted affections," Fleur admitted. Harry hadn't thought about that before. Of course, he rarely even remembered that she had an aura.

"That's too bad," Harry said, not sure what else there was to say. He kept dancing with her, moving a tad closer to her.

"I am accustomed to it," she said. Harry wasn't sure what to say about that. Their song ended and Fleur moved away from it.

"Wait. One more," Harry said. She looked back at him, seeming to weigh the options for a moment, before walking back into his arms.

"Fine, but you 'ave to lead," she said, and he did. It was a slow song and he held her close as they danced. He held onto her carefully, leading them in a slow circle on the dance floor. Fleur didn't say anything. She didn't need to. She simply clung to him and moved with him.

Harry never wanted the song to end. But after four blissful minutes it did. Fleur dislodged herself from him and moved away without a word. Harry watched her walk back toward Roger and accept a drink with a smile. He couldn't look away. Thankfully he was pulled into another dance.

"Hung up on the Veela, eh?" Daphne asked. "I'm actually a little jealous."

"I'm sorry," Harry said, blushing a little bit. "I should probably be more focused on you. Really, thanks for coming with me."

"I'm having fun, Harry. Unfortunately there's no one else I want to try to dance with. So you're stuck with me for the rest of the night."

"That's fine," he said as he pulled her closer for another slow song. "What was Hermione lecturing you about? House elf rights?"

"House elf rights? What? Why would anyone lecture me about that? They go insane when you free them!" Harry just shrugged. "How did you know she was lecturing me?"

"She gets this look," Harry responded. "I've seen it enough."

"I bet you have. She was lecturing me about you."

"Anything good?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary. Just some more things I can use as blackmail material. You know, make you do things for me so I don't tell Draco," Daphne said.

"Oh good," Harry responded dryly. "And what do I have to do now?"

"Oh just keep dancing. I'll think of something eventually," she responded, moving closer to him. Harry obliged, moving in a slow, small circle in much the same way he had with Fleur. Daphne seemed to enjoy herself. Mostly they just looked at each other. Harry couldn't help but wonder how things may have been different had he not met Malfoy until after the sorting. Had that been the case then perhaps he and Daphne wouldn't have seemed so strange.

Harry didn't think about that too hard, though. Instead he just focused on dancing with the pretty witch in his arms. They spent the vast majority of the night on the dance floor, simply enjoying each other's company.

They did take occasional break where they would sip some of the diluted wine and chat quietly about nothing in particular. Funny stories from each other's houses were the main topics of conversation. They even described their house's common room to each other. Harry didn't have the heart to tell her that he'd been in the Slytherin one before.

It was one such break where they found themselves talking with a few Hufflepuffs. Harry wasn't really paying attention to the general conversation. It was something about the tournament, which meant he should have probably been paying more attention. But he was too busy watching Fleur and Roger. Roger was trying to lead her out of the Great Hall. She seemed to be resisting. Judging from her dress, she didn't have her wand handy. Harry saw them leave. He knew he shouldn't have cared. But he couldn't help but feel that something was wrong.

"I'm going to use the loo," he said, standing and moving toward the doors.

"Hurry back," Daphne called after him. "You still owe me that final dance."

He stepped into the hall. A few students loitered around, ending their evenings early, Harry supposed. He wasn't sure which way Fleur and Roger had gone, but he picked the path that led back to the Ravenclaw common room.

It only took a few halls before he could hear Roger's voice. He knew he shouldn't be doing this. Something about it just felt wrong. He found them quickly. Roger was kissing her, rather forcibly. He had her pressed to a wall. Harry swallowed hard, unsure of what to do. He'd seen people snogging before, to be sure, but he'd never wanted to punch the guy before.

He was going to leave. He knew he should. But he noticed Fleur struggling against him. She pushed him away briefly and tried to move away. She had tears on her face. Roger was on top of her after a moment.

He reacted purely on instinct. He didn't think of any of the ramifications. He pulled out his wand and pointed it at his Captain.

"Stupefy," he said. Roger collapsed in a heap when the jolt of light hit him. Fleur looked up and her eyes met Harry's.

"Arry?" she asked carefully. He walked up to her.

"Are you okay?" he asked. He looked down briefly to make sure Roger was indeed stunned.

"Oui. Just stupid," she said. "May I 'ave your wand?" Harry handed it to her without thinking. She conjured herself a tissue and handed it back.

"Are you sure?" he asked again.

"Yes. Mother always said to always 'ave my wand. I left it in my room," she sighed. Harry was surprised that she had recovered so quickly.

"This happens a lot?" Harry asked.

"I told you. Ze aura always wins," Fleur said. "'E caught me off guard, or I would have charmed 'im and made 'im leave," Fleur explained. Harry didn't have the heart to say that a crying defenseless witch

probably wouldn't be able to charm much. He noticed she was still crying a tad too, sniffing gently. He moved closer to her and hugged her. She simply went limp in his arms.

"I'm sorry," he said gently, closing his eyes and trying his best not to breathe. He wasn't sure what exactly triggered Roger's actions, but at the very least he didn't want the same fate to befall him.

"It is okay, 'Arry," she said softly. "You should get back to ze ball. Your date will be worried."

"She can wait," Harry said quickly. Of course, the thought made him feel bad for Daphne. At the very least he wouldn't miss the final dance. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes, 'Arry," she slid out of his arms. "I will take care of Roger."

"What are you going to do to him?" Harry asked. Fleur looked at him for a moment, her eyes still wet. She smiled weakly, though.

"Prop him up against ze wall and walk away," Fleur said. "When 'e wakes up 'e will probably just assume 'e will likely assume 'e just passed out."

"Oh. That sounds like an okay plan. I'll do it." Harry slid Roger over toward the wall, leaving him there. Fleur just watched, she was still shaking slightly. After a moment she finally spoke.

"Thank you, 'Arry. I do not like to admit it. But my own stupidity caused me to be 'elpless tonight. It looks like I should 'ave taken you up on ze offer to accompany you tonight." She said slowly.

"I'm just glad you're okay," Harry responded dumbly. "Are you going back to the ball?"

"No. But you should. I am going back to ze carriage," she said rather sternly. He walked with her to the entrance hall, not sure of what to say. When they arrived he still didn't know what to say. Fleur broke the awkward silence.

"'Ave you figured out ze clue for ze next task yet?" she asked.

"I haven't really thought about it," Harry admitted.

"Open it under water," she said quickly. "Now enjoy ze rest of your night." She turned to leave. Harry saw Daphne emerge from the Great Hall at that moment. She looked at him, he turned and watched Fleur go. He knew he should probably follow her. He knew he should do something noble like escort her back to the carriage. He knew he should do anything that could prove he wasn't just a boy.

But Madame Maxime beat him to it. The headmistress walked up behind her star pupil and Harry realized he hasn't even managed to wish her a good night.

"Harry?" Daphne asked quietly from his side.

"Sorry," He said quickly. "Just ran into Fleur. I was just saying good night. I didn't miss the last dance, did I?"

"No. You didn't," she said, taking his arm and leading him back into the hall.

The ball was winding down, but most couples were still there. Daphne led him back to the dance floor and they slow-danced once more.

"You should probably be aware of the Hufflepuffs," she said in an obvious attempt to keep the mood light.

"Why's that?" Harry asked.

"Susan and Hannah are almost as obsessed with you as they are Cedric. When he's gone next year you may want to test most of your food."

"With the looks some of the Slytherins are giving me now, I should do that anyway," Harry responded.

"That may be a good idea," Daphne agreed.

"Sounds like a lot of work," Harry laughed.

"Just have an elf do it for you. I'm sure Granger will appreciate that," Daphne laughed.

"Oh yes. That would end well. She'd probably end up assaulting me if I did something like that." As he finished speaking an announcement came on that they were on the final song of the evening. It was also slow, one of the slowest of the night. Daphne inched closer to him. She wrapped her arms around his neck and moved her body closer to his. They silently moved in a small circle for the first few moments of the song.

"So, are you really going to try for the French witch?" She asked quietly.

"I don't know," he responded. "I'd like to try."

"You and every other male in the castle."

"I guess."

"Well, how are you going to do it?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I don't know anything about her. But she seems like she could use someone mellow and caring. I expect she doesn't get many boys that simply care for her. That may be your best route." Daphne advised.

"Thanks for the advice," Harry said carefully.

"You're welcome. And if that doesn't work, you could always just tell her and be assertive. But don't make it seem like you're charmed."

"Maybe I'll try that."

"Yes, but I must tell you. It's rather bad form to talk about how you're going to try to woo another girl while dancing," she said.

"But you brought it up!" Harry claimed. She laughed.

"That's irrelevant, Harry." She closed her eyes. Moving as close to him as she could while he led her in the short circles. He figured it was probably best if he simply kept silent for the remainder of the dance.

When it ended the remaining couples were ushered out of the hall by tired looking professors. Most of the students loitered around the hall, not quite wanting the night to end. Harry and Daphne walked toward the junction where they would have to part for their respective common rooms.

"Harry," Daphne said quietly. He paused and looked at her.

"Yes Daphne?" Harry asked.

"I had a fantastic time tonight. Thanks for asking me," She said, giving him another tight hug. She paused for a moment and stared into his eyes.

"You're welcome." He blushed. "I'm glad you enjoyed yourself. I had a fantastic time as well. She paused for a moment. Harry wasn't sure if he should let go of her or not. The next thing he knew her soft lips were pressed to his own. He froze. After a moment Daphne pulled away and looked at him.

"Was that your first kiss?" She asked carefully.

"Uhm, yea," Harry admitted, again feeling his face flush.

"You're lucky I'm not the French witch. I'll give you a mulligan. Try again," she ordered.

"What?" he asked.

"Kiss me again," she said, rather more sternly. Harry didn't have the heart to tell her she initiated the first one. Instead, he simply obeyed. He leaned forward and pressed his lips cautiously to hers. He kept the kiss as careful and light as he could. After a few moments Daphne pulled away.

"Was that better?" he asked.

"Considerably." She smirked. "Harry Potter's first kiss. I hope you don't mind if I brag about that."

"Go for it," Harry shrugged.

"Good. Good night then, Harry." She gave him a peck on the cheek. "Thank you again." She started to walk down to the Slytherin common room.

"Thank you as well, Daphne," he said quietly. As he walked back to the Gryffindor common room he again allowed himself to think what may have been had he not convinced the sorting hat he wasn't a Slytherin.

But that thought didn't last as he remembered leaving Roger stunned against the wall. He wondered what repercussions would come from that. At the very least, their next practice should be interesting, even though it wasn't until after break ended. Roger couldn't have known he was there, though. Fleur was the only one who saw him. Hopefully she was right and he'd simply assume he passed out.

Either way, he wouldn't worry about it until morning. He'd focus on his egg now. Hopefully Fleur's clue would help him more. Of course, if water was required for the clue, water would likely be in the task. So he assumed the lake, the largest body of water in the area, would be involved.

He shook that thought out of his head. Until he figured out the clue, he shouldn't think too hard about possible tasks. He could just wind up preparing for something completely irrelevant. And that could be a fatal mistake.

Author's Note: I'm not sure where to begin on this chapter. Absolutely nothing from the planning of the story found its way into this one. Harry's date was originally Astoria Greengrass, set up in much the same way. But I had assumed she was a third year, as opposed to a second. So, I changed my mind on that. From there, pretty much every girl who rejected him last chapter became a potential option. For a variety of reasons, they didn't make the cut.

So instead I fashioned this version of Daphne. Part annoyed Slytherin, part happy to not have to dance with Goyle. She ended up being somewhat closer to how the 'Lilly' character was planned to be in the original draft, before she fell into a supporting role. In the end, all I can really say about this chapter is that I'm glad it's over. The ball was the roadblock that I knew I'd have to deal with sooner or later.

Regardless, I hope you enjoy reading it more than I enjoyed writing it. Next up is a little more filler before the next task and Quidditch match. Two things that I'm at least excited about writing. The next chapter 'should' be a tad shorter. It mapped at around 6,000 words, but we'll see.

Either way, thanks for your reviews, I appreciate every one of them. I hope you enjoy the update.

Chapter 12

January

Harry found himself walking to the pitch on the first cold Sunday in January. He'd received a note from Harris telling him they would be testing the brooms. He was told to report to the pitch at ten, in his quidditch uniform. He was also told he wouldn't need his broom.

So he'd gone about his normal routine for a Sunday morning before going to the locker room to change. He stretched a little bit before walking to the pitch, and immediately regretted being early.

Aside from Lewis Harris, there were two other sponsors. Harry recognized the logos on their robes. Next to the sponsors, however, were reporters and cameramen. A lot of them. More than Harry could quickly count.

He debated walking back to the locker room and acting like he had forgotten something, but that thought didn't last long in his head.

"Harry!" Lewis yelled. Harry cursed himself for being punctual.

"Hello," he said as he walked toward the sponsors.

"Good morning!" Lewis responded, clapping him on the back as if they were old friends. Harry couldn't help but shrug away from the touch.

"Yea, you too," he said quietly.

"I hope you don't mind, Harry, but we've decided to make this public." Harris sounded a tad too excited. Harry didn't really care if there was an audience, though.

"That's fine," he said. He glanced around and saw that some students did appear to be filtering down onto the pitch. He noticed someone dressed in quidditch official garb was examining three brooms near the reporters. He could tell one of the brooms was the same type as his Lotus, so he could only assume the other two were the Renault and Mercedes.

"Good! Now I'm sure you wouldn't mind answering a few questions before we start?"

"I guess not," Harry said. Admittedly, he wasn't sure if he really had a choice in the matter. Harris then moved him over to face the reporters. He hoped the questions would be limited to quidditch and flying. It wasn't so bad when he was asked about that after the first task.

"Harry! Are you prepared for the second task?" one asked immediately.

"Not really," Harry said. "I'm working on it though. I still have nearly two months," he responded honestly. So much for the questions being limited to flying.

"So not worried about not being prepared?" Another asked.

"No. I'll come up with something," he responded. The reporters looked a bit surprised. Harry shrugged as he finished speaking. As he thought about it more, he wasn't sure if he would have honestly answered that question had he had a plan formed, simply to not be questioned on what the plan could be. Of course, it hadn't really occurred to him to lie to reporters before. He'd been nothing but honest in the past.

"They say you had quite the ball. In fact, it is rumored that Rita Skeeter is writing an article about your multiple partners during the dance," one of the reporters said. Harry blinked and looked at the middle-aged witch who awaited his response.

"Was that a question?" he asked. The reporter flushed, and some of the others chuckled quietly. He hadn't meant to sound like an ass, he just didn't know how to answer the statement.

"How do you feel about that?" The reporter asked snottily. Harry was annoyed, but he figured he had it coming.

"I don't really have an opinion. I don't read anything she writes," he admitted. Of course, he didn't read anything any of them wrote. But he figured it would be bad form to admit that.

"No other comments?" the witch asked. Harry shrugged.

"Just one. Isn't it a tad low to write an article about someone and not even ask them for an interview or a quote?" Harry asked. The other reporters laughed, one of them shouted something that sounded like agreement. The reporter blushed furiously and Harry simply looked around the group again.

"Harry!" a young male reporter shouted. "Are you looking forward to flying with Krum again?"

"Yea, I am," Harry said. "Viktor is amazing on a broom. I hope I can learn something from watching."

"Not worried that this test could show one broom to be completely superior to the others?" a different reporter asked. Harry hadn't thought about that, so it took him a moment to formulate a response.

"Not really," he said. "I assume the brooms were tested before we got them. At the very least we've all played a match so far and I don't think any of the brooms seemed superior to the others."

"So you're not going to favor the Lotus?" another reporter asked.

"I'm just going to fly whatever they tell me when they tell me. I'll try my best on each broom," Harry admitted. The answer seemed to appease the reporters. It helped that they all noticed Krum and Sinclair were approaching the pitch, each wearing their school quidditch uniforms.

The reporters turned their attention to the new pair. Harry felt momentarily disappointed about not being the center of attention. But then he realized that he hadn't wanted to talk to the reporters, so he felt considerably more relieved.

He meandered over to where the official was still checking over the brooms. He watched the official for a moment, before looking over the brooms himself.

At just a quick glance the Lotus appeared to be the middle of the three. The Renault was the most compact of the brooms. Harry assumed it probably handled the best. The Mercedes appeared to be the fastest, at least just judging by how it was built.

"Enough," Harry heard Krum say. Apparently Viktor had grown tired of the questions. "We came to fly. Let us fly."

"I couldn't have said it better," Sophie said from next to him. She'd been asked the fewest questions of the three. Harry couldn't help but notice her English was impeccable, although she had an odd accent. Krum gave her a brief smile.

"Alright, alright. Reporters please clear over to the sidelines," Harris said. The reporters obeyed, grumbling as they did. "Okay, now you three. We're going to start you on your own brooms and switch off for each task. We're going to start with a standard sprint. Length of the pitch against each other. We'll flip brooms and go back, flip again and do one final run. You all have that?"

"Sounds simple enough," Harry said. The other seekers agreed.

A few moments later Harry found himself floating between Viktor and Sophie, waiting for the official to drop his arm, the signal for them to start. His arm fell and the three seekers sped down the pitch as quickly as they could. Krum won, followed by Harry and Sophie.

They switched brooms quickly and raced back on the official's signal. Krum won again, on the Lotus, followed by Sophie then Harry on the Renault. They flipped again and raced one last time. Harry won on the Mercedes, followed closely by both Sophie and Viktor.

They followed that drill with agility and quickness drills. They flew back and forth the short end of the pitch, as tightly as they could. They sponsors had set up markers for each turn they had to make.

Krum set the fastest time again, but this time on the Renault. Harry was second, also on the Renault, and Krum put in the third fastest on the Lotus. The Mercedes flopped at that drill. Each of the seekers barely finished on the broom.

After they focused on a variety of drills that involved quickly changing direction and keeping speed, as well as staying on a specific line. The Renault and Lotus were rather evenly matched there, but again the Mercedes lagged a little bit behind on the reaction time. It was the only set of drills where Harry and Sophie matched Viktor. In fact, murmurs could be heard from the crowd that

for some of these drills the young Harry Potter actually out flew the Bulgarian star.

Finally, they drilled feints and dives. The Mercedes and Lotus topped the drills there, again with Krum far outshining the competition. The highlight being a superbly executed Wrongski Feint.

"Alright everyone!" Harris's magically enhanced voice echoed through the stadium. Harry looked around to see that a rather large crowd had gathered in the stands on the pitch. "While we prepare for our last event we have decided to offer a lunch break!" The Lotus sponsor made a sweeping gesture as he finished talking. Several large tables appeared on the pitch, with piles of food on each.

Harry watched from above as students left their seats and made their way onto the pitch. The excited conversations melded into one loud rumble below him. He noticed Sophie flew off toward some Beauxbaton's students, and Viktor landed near some Durmstrang ones. Harry searched for a familiar face below him.

His eyes first found Roger and Lilly, who looked to be arguing over something. He still wasn't sure if Roger really knew what happened to end his night at the ball. But no one had said anything so he assumed the captain didn't. Of course, that didn't mean he felt like approaching him immediately.

He looked for Fleur next, but didn't see her so he continued to look for someone he knew.

He saw Ron and Hermione. Hermione looked annoyed and was attempting to argue something with Ron, who didn't appear to be paying attention. He still looked a bit surly. Harry knew he was upset about the Ball, but it wasn't his or Hermione's fault that he'd done nothing but brood during the entire thing.

Either way, he turned the lotus, which he tested feints last with, and began to descend toward his friends. But then he saw something out of the corner of his eye. It appeared that Miss Greengrass swatted Mr. Malfoy. This warranted further investigation.

He turned the broom toward the group of Slytherins who were approaching one of the tables.

"Hello Daphne," he said, landing his broom next to them.

"Harry," Daphne smiled.

"Go away, Potter," Draco interrupted.

"Hello, Draco," Harry said. "I see you're still wearing your C. You know, most people would only wear that on their uniform. I do hope you have better luck in the later rounds."

"Shut up, Potter. You're strutting around with that A emblazoned on your chest."

"Only because they required I wear my uniform. I don't see you complaining about Krum's C."

"Boys!" Daphne exclaimed. "Enough bickering, food time. Why did you come over here?"

"I saw you slap Malfoy. It amused me so I decided to see what that was about," he said as they grabbed some sandwiches from the table. Harry was hungry, so he picked up a ham and turkey sandwich.

"Oh. He wouldn't shut up about Viktor and how they were pen pals. I got annoyed so I hit him." Daphne explained as she picked up a sandwich as well.

"Sounds like a good reason," Harry laughed.

"Go away, Potter. None of us give a damn what you think," Draco said.

"Testy, Draco? Fine, I'll leave," he turned to go. But then he got an idea. "Care to join me, Daphne?" The Slytherin looked at him for a moment.

"Where are you going?" she asked. Her gaze shifted over toward Ron and Hermione. Harry could tell that she didn't consider that an upgrade from Draco and his cronies.

"I was probably just going to fly around a bit," Harry said, hoping Daphne would find that a better option. He got back on the broom and looked at her.

"Okay." She got on to the broom as well, pressing herself against him. Draco said something as he took off, but Harry didn't fully make it out. He took her up about fifty feet before carefully turning around on the broom to face her, before starting on one of his sandwiches.

"So what brought you out here today?" he feebly attempted to start a conversation.

"Boredom mostly," she admitted.

"Ouch. Are we at least entertaining?"

"Very. Although Draco is seething. He just can't understand why you of all people gets the honor of flying around with Krum," Daphne said.

"Oh, and what did you tell him?" He started on his second sandwich.

"That maybe if he practiced, like at all, he'd have a shot."

"Bet he liked that."

"Oh yes. He told me I was lucky I was pretty because I clearly just didn't get it."

"Ouch."

"And that would be why I slapped him," she said, daintily finishing her lunch.

"Well he does have a point. You are lucky you're pretty," Harry teased.

"I'll hit you too, Potter," She responded, narrowing her eyes. But she softened when she saw he was smiling.

"Why do you still hang around with him?" Harry couldn't help but ask.

"I don't, usually," she admitted. "Since Tracey started dating Titus I usually hang around with them. Malfoy just likes to be everywhere."

"I see."

"It gets worse as he gets older. The elder students weren't afraid of putting him in his place when he got too annoying. Now they're starting to let him do just about anything he likes."

"That does sound a bit annoying," Harry admitted. Daphne just shrugged.

"What do you think they're going to make you do for the last bit?" She asked. Harry could tell she was simply changing the subject.

"No idea. I overheard the sponsors discussing a race, though. So, I imagine something like that. It does sort of look like they're designing a track up there." Harry said.

"Hmm. I guess you're right," she said. "Fly around a bit. I'm getting sick of seeing Draco staring up at me."

"Alright," Harry said, shifting himself back onto the broom properly. Daphne leaned against his back as he started to simply fly around the pitch. He lazily weaved between the hoops at one end before cruising back down toward the other.

"Oh come on at least try something I couldn't do myself," she commanded. Harry laughed and pulled the broom into a steep climb. Daphne cried out and grabbed onto him.

"So something like this?" He turned quickly and pushed the broom straight toward the ground. Daphne grabbed onto him and held on rather too tightly. She didn't scream though, which Harry had expected. He pulled out of the dive a few inches above the lake and looked over his shoulder to see Daphne carefully opening her eyes.

"Okay, you're insane," she said.

"You wanted something you couldn't do," Harry responded with a quick laugh. "I'd have pulled up even later if it was just me." He pulled the broom up a bit and slowly flew back toward the pitch.

"Yes, but something that doesn't result in death would also be appreciated," Daphne said coldly.

"Oh come on. That move wasn't even that dangerous. And if you notice, we're both still alive. So it certainly didn't result in death." Harry laughed.

"You really are insane," She teased.

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"It was intended as such," she said dryly.

"Anything else you want me to do?" he asked.

"No. Nothing really." They were silent for a few moments. Harry flew in a circle around the lake, and eventually back toward the pitch.

"Looks like they may want me back now," he said, and indeed the sponsors did seem to have finished organizing the final event.

"Yes it does," Daphne said as they flew back to the pitch. She gazed down at the ground for a few minutes before adding. "Oh, and don't look now, but the French witch looks jealous." Naturally, Harry looked immediately. Daphne wacked him on the shoulder as soon as she did. "I said don't look!"

Fleur was staring up at them, but then again, so were quite a few people on the pitch. She did; however, wear a rather interesting expression. She half smiled in a way that indicated she wanted to be a lot happier than she was. Her eyes also focused on Daphne, rather than Harry. Harry couldn't help but think that she may have been wonder if she could have been the one on the broom. When she realized that Harry was watching her, she looked away and quickly retreated toward the Beauxbaton's contingent.

"I guess she is. I thought I wasn't supposed to mention other girls around you."

"You're not. But it's okay when I bring it up. And having a Veela jealous of me is pretty awesome. If I do say so myself," Daphne said. Harry again didn't have the heart to mention that during the ball it had been irrelevant who brought it up.

"If you insist," he laughed, landing the broom near the group of Slytherins he originally stole her from. She slid off of the broom and moved toward her friends.

"Thanks Harry," she said, gazing over her shoulder at him. "Good luck in the last event."

"You're welcome. Thank you," he responded, shooting back off into the sky. He floated next to Krum and Sinclair as the main three sponsors flew out to meet them.

"Alright!" Harris yelled. "Our final event will be a race! We'll give you each five laps alone at our target track. And after that we'll do a full out race. We're going to shoot for twenty-five laps. We'll put you on your own brooms here, simply because they should have different strengths and prosper at different times on the track.

"We've based the track off of a famous circuit that has long been a fan favorite. It's done to scale with your broom speeds, which should give you comparable lap times.

"Miss Sinclair will be given the track first, followed by Mr. Potter, and then Mr. Krum. So, whenever you are ready, Miss," Harris said. Sophie nodded and flew up further above the pitch to where the track was magically marked out into the sky.

The French seeker waited for the signal from Harris before speeding off across the track. Harry and Viktor watched her to for a few moments, both eyeing the sharp turns on the circuit above them. After she completed her first lap, 1:21:949, and her second lap 1:18:302, Harry spoke to Viktor.

"So can I ask you one thing?" He asked, not sure if he should call him.

"Keep tight in corners, outside line in, inside line out," Viktor said.

"Uhm. Thanks, but that's not what I was going to ask," Harry said. Not quite understanding fully what Viktor meant with that, but he assumed it would help on the track.

"What then?"

"You know that pen pal assignment we had over the summer? Well, did you really write to Draco Malfoy?" Harry asked. He'd wondered about that ever since Draco had bragged.

"I do not know," Viktor said. "Which one is he?"

"Blonde one, about my height," Harry said.

"Ah, poor duelist. Talks too much."

"Uhm yea. So was he your pen pal during the summer? He brags about it."

"No idea," Krum said. "Agent wrote letters for me during the season." Harry looked at him as Sophie finished her last lap. He didn't have time to respond before Harris's voice rang through the stadium again.

"And that makes Miss Sinclair's fastest time at 1:17:102. Now, Mr. Potter, please approach the track!" Harry obliged, flying up to where Sophie returned from.

He waited for the signal to go from Harris. When the sponsor's arm finally dropped he shot off through the course. He shot forward into a quick right followed by a quick left. It only took to the first turn to understand what Viktor's words had meant. He came up on it wrong and lost a lot of time righting himself into the third turn. A long looping right hander that led into a quick straight ending with a sharp right to left chicane.

Followed by another quick chicane into hard, slow left hander that let out into a quick right. He found himself on a long stretch again. He could almost get the Lotus up to top speed before a quick right-left chicane that he almost felt like he slid through. After that there was another long stretch that slowly curved to the right.

Unfortunately, he lulled himself a bit as he pushed the broom and he completely missed the braking zone on the upcoming right-handed hairpin. He shot wide but recovered enough to speed off down the final long stretch.

He felt as if he was on that straight forever. At least until a final, very tight, right-left chicane. He knew Harris announced the lap time as he sped back past the starting point, but he couldn't hear it. He knew he could be faster than the first lap, so he focused on that.

"And with that!" He heard Harris yell as he finished his fifth lap and pulled out of the course. "Young Mister Potter's fastest time is a very impressive 1:15:682. He dropped two seconds off of his previous lap. Mr. Krum is going to be hard pressed to top that!" Harry couldn't help but grin as he heard that. He flew back toward Sophie as Krum flew toward the track.

His record didn't last long though. Krum beat it on his third lap, then topped it again on his fourth, and shattered it on his fifth.

"Just wow! Ladies and Gentleman, Viktor Krum puts in a 1:14:120. It's no wonder he's the professional!" Harry just shook his head in awe. He watched the Durmstrang seeker fly back around to the starting line. He and Sophie joined him, although they both knew they didn't particularly stand a chance in the actual race.

An hour later he found himself working his way back to the locker room to change out of his uniform. Krum had won the race, but Harry had made it closer than most people expected. All in all, it had been a rather fun day.

Most of the crowd was dispersing back to the school, carriage or ship. Very few actually noticed Harry as he walked toward the locker room at the end of the pitch. He ducked quietly into the locker room. He'd intended simply to change, but decided on a quick shower as well. It wasn't until halfway through the shower that he remembered Fleur's clue about the egg. Of course, the egg was locked in his trunk in his bedroom. He made a mental note to check that the next time he cleaned himself.

He stepped out of the shower, toweled off, and wandered back into the main part of the locker room to change back into his school uniform. He left fully intending to simply head up to the common room and spend the day simply hanging out with his friends.

He let out a deep contented sigh as he stepped into the brisk air. He turned toward the castle when he heard her soft, accented voice.

"Arry," she said quietly.

"Yes Fleur?" he asked.

"You flew well today. I wanted to congratulate you on zat," she said carefully. Harry couldn't help but smile a little bit. But he kept his distance. He hadn't spoken to her since the ball and he wasn't sure what to expect. He frantically tried to remember what Daphne had advised, but his mind was simply drawn back to a mulligan.

"Thank you, Fleur. So the show was enjoyable?"

"Oh yes. I believe zat ze racing was lost on most of ze spectators. But ze broom drills were entertaining," she spoke carefully as well. Harry felt tense and he wasn't really sure why. Fleur looked concerned too.

"Well that's good," Harry admitted. "It was rather fun. And hey, at least lunch was provided, right?"

"You know my preference on lunch, 'Arry. While it was a nice gesture, I will still be eating a larger dinner in ze carriage tonight."

"I guess. That risotto would have been delicious this afternoon."

"Yes, but challenging to eat while you fly around."

"Probably. But regardless. It would still be delicious."

"You 'ave no argument from me," she said. Harry noticed she was toying with her wand, but he didn't mention it. "But I saw you were flying with zat girl."

"Daphne? Yea, it was fun."

"I doubt zat," she laughed.

"Why is that?"

"Flying like zat is not fun. It is scary," Fleur admitted with a cute nod. Almost as if she thought that the nod settled everything.

"You said you liked flying in one of your letters," Harry responded.

"I was being diplomatic. It is okay when used as a means for transportation. But when it is done like you, it is simply scary. And I was merely being diplomatic in ze letter," she scoffed.

"I bet I could get you to like it," Harry challenged.

"Zat is doubtful. Lilly could not make me enjoy it." She smiled rather politely.

"Oh. Maybe. But I'm a better flyer, and probably more fun to sit with on a broom."

"I would not be so sure of yourself, 'Arry," Fleur teased.

"Oh, something I should know?" Harry asked.

"Non," Fleur said quickly. "'Ave you followed my advice on ze egg?"

"Not yet," Harry admitted sheepishly. "I've been a tad busy. I was going to sit down with it tonight or tomorrow and attempt to work it out."

"You should. It sounds difficult," Fleur said.

"Well you could always just tell me. You know, I just flat out told you for the first task," he teased. She glared at him for a moment.

"Yes, but I already knew ze first task," Fleur countered.

"That's so just a technicality," Harry argued. "It was the thought that counted."

"Maybe. But I want to beat you, 'Arry Potter, so I will not simply just give you information. No matter 'ow nice it was zat you did for me," Fleur said.

"That is certainly not fair," Harry said with a quiet laugh.

"It is not. But I did say I wanted to win."

"So I'm a threat?"

"Of course. You are tied for ze lead."

"Guess I'm not too little for the tournament then?" Harry teased. Fleur flushed a deep red.

"I was concerned for your safety!" she argued.

"But not concerned enough to simply tell me what the task it?" He continued. She opened her mouth to comment, but quickly closed it, pressing her lips tightly together. She said something in French that sounded rather annoyed.

"Are you simply arguing to annoy me now?" she asked.

"Well that, and to not have to figure out the clue myself," Harry joked.

"Zat is not going to work, 'Arry." She crossed her arms and looked at him. She had a curious expression on her face. Almost like she couldn't quite finger why Harry was even bothering to keep trying.

"Well that's a shame. I take it people don't argue with you much?" He asked.

"It depends on ze topic. Men argue with me about what zey think I want all ze time." She said coldly. Harry was going to point out that she didn't quite answer his question, but a stray thought slipped out of his lips instead.

"Well then what do you want, Fleur?" he asked, staring into her blue eyes. She tilted her head to the side.

"And why would you be interested in zat?" she asked. Harry smiled and decided to stall for time.

"Fancy a walk around the lake with me, Fleur?" he asked, gesturing to his side. She crossed her arms.

"You did not answer my question," she replied.

"Oh, I'll get to that. But since you won't answer my question about the task, I may as well wait a minute before answering yours. Now, walk with me?" he asked again.

"You are just doing zis to make me go with you," she accused, keeping her voice rather calm and level. Harry laughed.

"Hardly, Fleur. I have nothing else to do today and have been given the opportunity to walk with a friend. That is what I wish to do."

"Regardless, you are being intentionally frustrating." She scoffed at him, keeping her arms crossed across her chest and staring directly at him.

"So are you," Harry said. He turned and started to walk slowly near the edge of the lake. He didn't bother to look back, despite the fact that every cell in his body wanted to see how Fleur reacted. He didn't have to wait long to discover her reaction. She walked up next to him.

"Answer my question," she demanded.

"I am interested in what you want, Fleur because I rather like you, and I consider you to be a friend." Harry paused. "And I prefer if my friends are happy." He kept walking, not looking at her. He didn't know if that put him into the dreaded 'friend-zone' or not.

"Zat is very kind of you, 'Arry," she said. "Your friends are very lucky."

"They'd do the same for me," Harry responded. After all, they had. Sure, sometimes Ron needed a bit of prodding, but there was one in every bunch.

"You are very trusting," she said. Harry couldn't tell if it was a compliment or an insult.

"I'm not, really," he said. "With my friends, yes. But it was a long time before I really had a friend."

"And why was zat?" she asked.

"My cousin, mostly. But I'd rather not talk about it," Harry said, as forcefully as he could.

"Why not?" Her voice was so soft, Harry could barely hear her over the wind.

"Because it's unpleasant and I rather not think about it. And you don't answer any of my questions as is, so," Harry responded. He hoped it didn't sound too snotty.

"I am sorry, what was ze last one?"

"I asked what you wanted, Fleur," Harry replied.

"Oh yes. I doubt what I want is very different zan what you want," she replied. Again, Harry noticed she didn't directly answer him. It was becoming rather frustrating.

"I highly doubt that, Fleur. I have a feeling we're not in the same league as for what we want." Harry laughed hollowly.

"Well zen. What is it zat you want?" Fleur asked. Harry just started laughing.

"Really Fleur? I've asked you that same question twice. Once, you act like I have no business knowing, and the next you simply turn it back on me? I don't really see why I should bother answering that," he explained. Fleur stopped walking for a moment. He was sure she wasn't particularly happy with him. But he just continued his walk.

"Wait 'Arry," she said, catching up to him quickly. She paused for a moment before continuing. "I want a lot of zings. I want to win zis tournament. I want all of ze Beauxbaton's students to be cheering for me at ze final ceremonies."

"All your wants are centered on the tournament?" he asked.

"No. Zey are not. But zey come to mind first. Some are more simple. I want dinner, for example. Some are more complex."

"I was asking about the more complex ones."

"I understand. But those are ze ones zat are more difficult to talk about," she responded.

"Only with people you don't trust," Harry said. Of course, the things he wanted the most were very basic. But, she had a point. He wasn't sure if he would talk about them with just anyone, either.

"Maybe not. But I find zem very basic. I want to be loved and cared for. I want someone to appreciate me for all zat I am. I want to be happy. You know, I want to find ze 'one.' I want my family to be happy. I want my sister to have better luck as a younger girl zan I did," she explained, recounting as if from a list.

"I see. You were right." He said.

"About what?"

"We're not that different. Your wants are perhaps a tad more detailed than mine. I really just want a loving family that I can call my own," he said carefully. After all, he did love the Weasleys. But no matter how nice, helpful, or caring that they were, they were not his family.

The Mirror of Erised had left a rather strong impression on him. And while he tried not to think about it, there were many occasions where he simply couldn't help it. The book of pictures he had helped, sometimes. But on other occasions it just made it hurt more.

"I am sorry, 'Arry," she said. Harry knew it was simply because she could think of nothing better to say. Harry could tell she felt sorry for him, and in the grand scheme of things, the absolute last thing he wanted was pity.

"It's okay. I'm at school most of the time, anyway. And it won't be very long before I can find someplace else to live."

"Moving out right after school zen? 'Ave you thought about where?" He hadn't really. He also hoped it would be much sooner than when he was done with school. Still, he'd heard nothing about Sirius becoming free.

"London, probably," he said quietly, simply because he still didn't know where Sirius lived, and that seemed like the next best idea.

"Ah. Zat seems like a good choice. Although, with ze way you fly, you may want to find someplace closer to wherever your home stadium will be," she said. Harry couldn't help but smile at the compliment.

"I'm not sure professional quidditch is something I want to pursue. I didn't even really know anything about how the sport works on that level," he admitted.

"I am sure Viktor would answer any questions you could 'ave," she said.

"I'm sure he would too," Harry said. He was sure of no such thing, but Viktor had been pleasant with him about everything else so far. Harry looked over at her for the first time since starting the walk around the lake. He noticed she was flushed. He couldn't tell if that was simply from the cold, or from some type of earlier embarrassment. He assumed the cold.

Her hair also blew in the breeze. Well, floated in the breeze seemed to be a better way to describe it. Harry watched it for a moment, thinking of how to word it. He gave up after a moment and just looked at her face. If he hadn't known better he would have said she was glowing slightly. But he thought that must have just been his vision after flying all day.

"So," she said after he simply looked at her for a few moments. "You do not want to win ze tournament?" He couldn't help but laugh.

"Of course I do. I'd like dinner too. So I guess our smaller wants are pretty close too."

"Zat zey are. So I take it you will not be letting me win ze tournament?" she teased. He looked at her for a moment. Her hair seemed to be swaying more in the breeze. Harry smiled a little bit.

"Nope. Too much of a competitor at heart. I mean, I'm annoyed I lost a race and I've never even raced before." he smiled back at her. She nodded.

"That's what I 'ad 'oped. But I figured it may at least be worth a try."

"Yes. It never hurts to ask. I take it you won't let me win, either?"

"Of course not," she responded. He noticed that her hair had stopped swaying in the wind and simply fell down her back now.

"Well, now that that's out of the way. Care to join me for dinner to solve the other want?" Harry asked.

"Oh. I am sorry," Fleur shook her head. "But I 'ave a few other zings zat I must finish."

"Oh, like what?" Harry asked.

"Well first I have to go change. Sophie is going to let me use ze Beauxbatons quidditch locker room for zat. And zen after I believe I will be going for a swim," Fleur said. Harry stared at her for a moment, wondering why the girl who had complained of the cold winter have any interest in swimming in a nearly frozen lake.

"And you think the way I fly is dangerous. It's probably considerably healthier than giving yourself pneumonia."

"I will be perfectly alright," Fleur said. "Enjoy the rest of your day."

"I will. Thanks. Don't freeze to death in the lake." They split then. She took the path that led back toward the pitch and the locker rooms, and he the path that led back to the hall. He couldn't help but wonder just how cold the lake must have been. At the very least he knew he didn't want to find out.

It was less than a little over a week later when he realized that he would have to find out. He could only hope that it would be warmer in late February than in the middle of January. Of course, he should probably be more worried about having to be under water for an hour, rather than how cold the water would be.

He'd skipped class that morning, mostly because a Monday morning potions lecture hadn't sounded the least bit appealing, and wandered down to the locker room with the golden egg in toe. On the way down he watched Viktor Krum jump off the Durmstrang boat and into the lake. Harry couldn't help but think that all of the foreign students must be just a little bit insane.

Once inside the locker room he stepped into the large shower room. Fleur's advice was to open the egg underwater so he decided to simply fill one of the tubs that were usually used for helping with sore muscles and relax in it with the egg for a moment.

He'd yet to use one of the tubs, but he knew the other players had. They had raved about the baths. Harry simply hadn't really had a reason to utilize them, having not taken a serious hit so far.

After twenty minutes he grew sick of constantly having to dunk his head to listen to the message. He memorized what he could, before climbing out of the tub and toweling himself dry. He changed into his practice uniform, figuring he'd work on the clue until practice started.

Harry had an interesting idea as he finished changing. He took a stool from the locker room into the large bathroom and placed the egg on it, directly under one of the shower heads. He opened the egg and winced away from the shriek. Harry then turned the water from the shower on and positioned the water so it sprayed square into the egg.

Sure enough, the shrill cry turned into the beautiful song almost as soon as the water hit. He cast a quick drying spell on his clothing, he'd only had his sleeve wet but that was enough to bother him. He propped the door to the showers open and walked back into the main area of the locker room. He could still hear the song so he lay down on the couch and listened for a few moments.

He'd brought some of his text books with him to the locker room, so he took the opportunity to summon them from his locker to the couch. He started to page through them slowly, looking for anything that would help with underwater exploration. He knew there was probably some simple charm or something that would make everything simple and he would have to locate it.

He wasn't having any luck when Lilly and Titus entered. They were arguing about a potion, Harry thought. But he wasn't paying close enough attention to them to make out the specifics.

"What is that?" Lilly asked after a moment. Harry still wasn't really paying attention.

"I don't know," Titus said. "But she sounds hot, and like it's coming from the bathroom. I'm going to go check her out."

"You're a perv. Harry, what's with the song?" Lilly asked again.

"It's the clue for the second task," he said.

"The egg that just shrieks? Cho was telling me that's all that happened when Cedric opened his."

"Yea. But when you open it under water, or with water rushing into it, it sings that song instead." He said. Lilly nodded a little bit and she and Titus just listened to it for a moment as the song looped around again.

"So they've taken something from you. And you'll have an hour to look for it?" Titus asked.

"Apparently. I'm assuming it's in the lake, too. The whole 'cannot sing above the ground' bit and all," Harry said.

"That seems like a good idea. We saw Krum swimming around earlier," Lilly said.

"Yeah. I saw him dive in this morning, too," Harry said.

"You a good swimmer?" Titus asked.

"Not at all," Harry responded. In truth, his swimming ability was limited mostly to doing his best to prevent being held under the water by Dudley. But he wasn't about to admit that.

"Well that could be a problem." Titus added.

"Yes. But I'm a little more worried about holding my breath for an hour," Harry responded.

"I take it that's what you're looking for now?" Lilly asked.

"Yea. I've found some interesting stuff, too. Like underwater lighting, and how to transfigure stuff into fish. But I'm not sure either of those are going to be particularly helpful," Harry admitted, turning another page. "I'll probably spend a good deal of time in the library after practice."

"Why don't you turn yourself into a fish?" the chaser asked.

"I thought about that, but I don't trust myself enough to transfigure myself. We haven't done any of that yet. And while that'd probably

help me get to whatever they take. I'm not sure how much it would help me rescue it, or get out," Harry commented. "And I'm not sure how intelligent of a fish I would be."

"What about just like specific body parts? Like your arms or feet into fins or something?" Titus asked.

"I'm in the same boat there, too. I'd likely screw up the casting day of and waste too much time trying to fix it. I'm sure there has to be something easier."

"Oh!" Lilly said after a moment. "The Bubble-Head Charm! I can't believe I didn't think of that sooner!" Harry looked up at her.

"How's that work?"

"It creates a bubble around your head. Used for breathing in toxic areas or underwater. I don't know how to cast it though. It's on our charms calendar for next month. Malcolm or Herbert might know."

"You're assuming I don't know?" Titus snapped.

"Well basic potions ingredients and their effects stump you. So yes, I'm assuming you don't know," Lilly responded. The Slytherin simply glared at her, but didn't press the issue so Harry also assumed he didn't know. He flipped to the index of the text he had to see if the charm appeared there. But it didn't.

"What's with the merpeople singing?" Fred asked as he and his brother entered the locker room.

"How do you know that's a merperson?" Titus asked. Fred and George exchanged a knowing glance, before simply shrugging.

"Let's just say there are some in the lake," George said.

"What would you have been doing deep enough in the lake to find them?" Lilly asked.

"Trust us. You'd rather not know." George responded.

"Now, what's with the song?" Fred asked again.

"It's the clue to the second task. The egg sings it in water, so I have one of the showers running into it." Harry figured it was better to simply explain it rather than to let Lilly and Titus distract them into the story of however they wound up at the bottom of the lake.

"So you're trying to find a way to hold your breath for an hour while searching for something important to you?" George asked.

"That's what it seems," Harry said, closing the book.

"And what have you come up with?" Fred asked.

"Well, I first thought about transfiguring myself. But I don't know how well that would work. Lilly just brought up the Bubble-Head Charm, but she and Titus don't know how to cast it."

"It's a fairly straightforward," Fred said. He took out his wand and pointed it at George. He said a quick incantation and a watery looking bubble appeared around George's face. George waved.

"Well that looks like it would work," Harry said, staring at George.

"How do you know how to perform the charm?" Titus asked.

"We spent a great deal of time working with dungbombs. We learned quickly," Fred said. "We'll show you how to use it. But I'm not sure I would suggest it for the task ahead."

"Why not? It looks efficient." Harry said, still eyeing George, who simply stood there with the bubble around his face. Fred nodded.

"Oh it is. However, we're assuming you're going to have to do more than simply swim around on the bottom of the lake looking for something?" Fred asked.

"Probably. I expect there are things in the lake that will probably be annoyed with us," Harry said.

"My thoughts exactly," Fred replied. "And now you see the innate weakness of the Bubble-Head Charm." Fred held up one finger rather dramatically. He reached over and poked it into the bubble around George's face, before quickly pulling it to the side, creating a large gap in the protective charm. It fixed itself rather quickly, though.

"It repaired itself," Harry commented. George removed the charm with a nod.

"Yes. It does repair. However, whatever was outside winds up inside. So you'd wind up with a face full of water, if something poked your bubble," George explained.

"We used to break each others in a room full of dungbombs when our research wasn't going exactly according to plan," Fred added.

"I see," Harry frowned. That had been the best idea so far. "Well, do you two have any more suggestions?"

"One," George said.

"We developed something similar to the Canary Cream earlier in our inventing. But rather than a bird, it turned the person into a giant salmon," Fred explained.

"It was rather hilarious. It had one downfall with which we hope our new partner can help us," George continued.

"You see. It's very hard to breathe with gills. George nearly suffocated during testing," Fred added.

"So we've shelved those for a moment. One of the central ingredients, though, is a fun little plant called Gillyweed. I'm surprised it wasn't the first thing our resident potions mistress thought of," George nodded toward Lilly. She cursed under her breath.

"Of course! It's not used in many potions, though. As you said, no matter what, people tend to keep the gills. Except in Gillywater, for some reason." Lilly seemed to ponder that for a moment. He half expected a Hermione-esque lecture to start, so he looked away from her.

"Indeed. We happen to have some left over that you could test, if you like. But we doubt it's enough for more than fifteen minutes under water. You'll have to order your own. The apothecary in Diagon alley has some for a fair price," Fred said.

"But what exactly does it do?" Harry asked.

"Webs your feet and hands a bit and gives you gills, pretty much," Lilly explained. Fred gestured to her this time, indicating she was right.

"Well I guess I'll try it out then," Harry said.

"Fantastic," George said. "We'll give you some after practice. But now go shut that egg up before I have that stupid song stuck in my head for the rest of the day!"

Author's Note: This chapter, much like the previous, changed a great deal from the original draft. Half the reason the update took so long was because I finished about 75% of it, and then scrapped it. At first, it opened with a frame of Sirius and Dumbledore discussing the plot hole that is Barty Crouch. Then it cut to the broom test, which was written as a newspaper article, rather than having it down as it is here, and finally ended with a similar scene. However, only about 20% of the chapter dealt directly with Harry, and there was no Fleur/Daphne, or really any character. So I reworked it.

That being said, I'm still not particularly happy with it. I think I wrote myself into a filler hole, but the next chapters are Tasks and Quidditch, so I have that to look forward to. I'm sure the broom testing bit will be tedious for quite a few of you. Props if you can identify the track they mimicked, but I doubt I did a good enough job explaining it.

There has also been some reviewer interest in the original drafts of this story, which feature many different things. For example, Chapter One doesn't exist in the way it does here. It is simply Harry's letter to an unknown pen pal, who turns out to be Miss Selson. Who, at the time, was named Sophie. She's a bit of a cross between the current Lilly, and the Beauxbatons' seeker. The original draft is about 28k words, and mostly just letter interaction between the two. They wrote quite a few more than Harry and Fleur did. When I'm done, I'll consider posting it as a 3-4 chapter Omake, but it's unedited and frightfully boring.

I've also started to plan another fanfic loosely based off of the 1991 Michael Shaara novel *For Love of the Game* that was later turned into a very mediocre movie. It would feature Harry and Luna, but

likely a more mellow and worn out with the world Luna. Solely because I'm not sure I'm capable of writing a canon Luna (Which is the reason she was not his ball date). It would probably only be 5-6 chapters, and likely under 70,000 words. But it's very preliminary at the moment, and I wouldn't expect to see anything else about it for quite some time. Some reviewers may be disappointed that my second planned fic is not Harry/Daphne. But I can't think of a plot there yet.

Regardless, thanks for all the reviews and support, I appreciate every last one. I should stop writing here now as the AN is likely to become longer than the chapter itself. Feel free to PM me with any questions/comments/concerns, I'm likely to respond to those more readily than anything else.

Thanks again. I hope you enjoy the update.

Chapter 13

The Great Lake

Harry and Ron walked quietly through the passage to Honeydukes. They had the invisibility cloak with them, but weren't wearing it at the moment. Harry figured that since so few people knew about the passage, the risk of running into anyone was rather low. And even if they did run into someone, it would likely be someone sneaking out of the school the same as them.

"So what are we doing again?" Ron asked. Harry rolled his eyes. Ron hadn't listened to much of the plan past sneaking into Hogsmeade. He had to give his friend credit, when he wasn't being a prat, and spiders weren't involved, he'd usually go along with anything.

"I want to drop some stuff off for Sirius and I need to stop at the apothecary to pick up some stuff," Harry explained.

"What could you need? You hardly ever go to potions!" Ron asked.

"It's for the second task," Harry said. "I need Gillyweed. And Lilly asked me to pick some stuff up for her, too."

"What's that do?" Ron asked.

"Kind of turns you into a fish. It's really strange. Your feet and hands go all webbed and you get gills. It's really painful above water, but underwater it's not so bad." Harry explained. He'd used the Gillyweed that the twins had given him alright. They were right, it only lasted about ten minutes. He'd simply submerged himself in a bathtub and floated there. He'd been perfectly able to breathe. Still, he'd yet to try swimming with the Gillyweed. He planned on buying enough to try it out a couple of times. Although, he still wasn't at all interested in going into the near-frozen lake.

"So the second task is under water?" Ron asked.

"I think so. The clue is a tad vague. But I think we have to find something in the lake. Either way, Viktor and Fleur have been swimming around in the lake, so," he said.

"But that could give them an unfair advantage!" Ron exclaimed. "They'll have the lake scouted!" Harry hadn't thought of that before.

"I doubt it will matter much. They're sure to set up something different for the actual task. I'll probably test the Gillyweed in the lake later anyway," Harry said. Ron didn't quite seem satisfied with the answer.

"Well at the very least you can try to gain the same advantage," Ron said.

"That's the plan." Harry nodded, figuring agreement was easier. They were silent for a bit as they continued down the path toward Honeydukes. Harry couldn't help but wonder who originally constructed it, and for what purpose. He didn't know enough about Hogsmeade to know what could have been there before the sweet shop, but it amused him to think of various things being smuggled in for the students to partake of centuries earlier.

"So, can I ask you something, Harry?" Ron asked after a few minutes of silence.

"Yea, go for it," Harry replied.

"What's he like?" Ron asked.

"Who?" Harry asked.

"Krum! Viktor Krum! You have to introduce me!" Ron exclaimed.

"He's sort of dating Hermione, I think. Why haven't you asked her?"

"I have. She told me he's nice, although stand-offish, and doesn't really like to spend a great deal of time in large groups. They don't spend that much time together anyway. He's always practicing or working on the tournament," Ron explained.

"Well I've only spoken to him a few times. He seems nice. A bit surly, but nice." Harry responded.

"Oh," Ron sounded a tad disappointed. "Skeeter was talking about how you and he and developed a deep friendship."

"Well she made that up," Harry laughed. "Seriously. I've barely spoken to him. He gave me some advice at the broom test, and some advice with dealing with reporters. That's about it."

"Oh. But you talked to him some at the ball," Ron said.

"Yes. But it was mostly just because our dates were talking," Harry responded. "Oh, you want to hear something interesting?"

"What's that?"

"You know how Draco has been bragging about Krum being his pen pal?" Harry asked.

"Of course. Hard to forget that. The bastard doesn't shut up about it." Ron responded, sounding a tad annoyed that Harry brought it up.

"Well see, Krum doesn't have a clue who his pen pal was. Turns out he didn't even do the assignment. Didn't bother with it during the quidditch season. His agent wrote the letters for him," Harry explained. Ron looked at him for a moment.

"So Malfoy probably paid to write to some agent, rather than the star?" Ron asked in disbelief.

"Seems that way," Harry replied.

"Oh that's classic." Ron laughed rather too loudly. It echoed through the passage.

"I thought you'd appreciate that," Harry said quietly. Ron talked about it for a few more minutes, but Harry didn't find the conversation overly appealing. At the very least his friend seemed to be in a considerably better mood than before, so that was nice. Ron didn't speak again until they neared the end of the tunnel.

"One other thing I've been wondering, too, Harry?" he asked.

"What's that?" Harry started to shake out the cloak so they would both fit under it as they snuck up through Honeydukes's cellar.

"Did you really kiss a Slytherin?" Ron asked quietly.

"Does that matter?" Harry responded.

"Well she's a Slytherin. And I overheard her bragging about it with some of the Hufflepuffs the other day," Ron said. Harry couldn't help but laugh, a rather uncontrollable laugh, which didn't seem to help his friend's mood. He couldn't believe Daphne had actually acted on that comment. Ron scowled at him and snapped. "What?"

"Nothing," Harry responded. "But yes, she's a Slytherin. She also tastes like fruit punch. It's rather pleasant. And, I gave her permission to brag."

"You what?" Ron asked.

"She asked if she could brag about being my first kiss. I said yes," Harry said. "I mean, I thought she was joking."

"It doesn't bother you?" Ron asked. Harry could tell that his friend wasn't quite sure how he would feel in a similar situation, and was going to use Harry's reaction as a starting point.

"Not in the slightest," Harry said. "I never really thought about it."

"I see," Ron said. "Still. Doesn't something just feel wrong about kissing a Slytherin? Like tonguing with a snake!"

"I speak snake," Harry said dumbly. Ron laughed.

"So you kiss them too?"

"Only one. And her tongue was perfectly normal," Harry responded.

"How was it?" Ron asked. Harry noticed that his friend seemed a tad more timid for a moment.

"It was fun," Harry said. "I don't really know how to describe it. Soft and warm. Close." Harry struggled for the words.

"So are you two dating then?" Ron asked.

"Erm," Harry responded. He hadn't really thought about it. He certainly didn't think so. It wasn't like they had midnight trysts or make-out sessions in broom closets. Although, that would be rather

fun. Maybe he should ask if she was interested. That would certainly be an interesting conversation. "I don't think we are. We're just friends. Well, rather tense friends."

"So you're not going to be dragging a Slytherin around with us then?"

"I doubt it." Harry had to bite his tongue. Ron was just trying to be funny, he knew.

"Well that's good. Looks like we're almost there. You should get the cloak ready," Ron said. Harry nodded and tossed it over himself, holding it up so Ron could get under as well.

The potions ingredients were easy enough to buy. He had them packaged and sent to Lilly at the castle. When the shopkeeper rang up the order Ron had gawked at the price.

"You're spending that much money on her?" He asked. Harry shook his head, hoping the Gillyweed wouldn't be that expensive when he bought it. He really did hope Ron wound up rich one day, just so he wouldn't always be commenting on money.

"No. She gave me the coin, to the knut, for the purchase," Harry lied, counting out the money. She'd simply said she'd reimburse him and asked for the receipt. Harry hoped that his friend would take it better if he didn't know it was Harry's money. Ron blinked a bit as he thought about that.

"Oh." Ron watched as Harry counted out the money out carefully. His strategy appeared to have worked.

"Yea. Have to make sure I get her the receipt, too," he said as the shopkeeper moved the parcel over to the corner, next to a few things he would mail out later that day.

"And is there anything else you will need today?" The shopkeeper asked.

"Yea. There is. Do you have any Gillyweed?"

"I do. How much are you looking for?" That was a good question. Harry wasn't sure how it was commonly sold. He hoped the owner

wouldn't be too suspicious. Of course, deep down he knew the owner recognized him, and could probably assume what Harry was likely to use the herb for. And, at the very least, the owner had not said anything about how they were in his shop, and it was not a Hogsmeade weekend.

"I'm not sure. I need it to last an hour. I'd like three that would last me an hour, and a few others that would last for shorter durations. Just like five minutes tops. I'm not sure how the stuff is usually sold," Harry admitted.

"Not by duration. Usually by weight" The shopkeeper said. "But I can measure it out for you to your specifications. For a fee, of course."

"Uhm. Okay. That'll work," Harry said. He wasn't sure he really had a say in the matter.

"Good. I will get that organized for you. Is there anything else you will need?"

"No that should do it," Harry responded, gazing around at the potions ingredients in the shop. It didn't take the shopkeeper long to organize the Gillyweed.

"Okay, the larger packets are the ones that should last you an hour. The smaller ones are the shorter duration ones. Try to keep them wrapped as they are to preserve freshness," the shop owner explained.

"Okay. I can do that. They will be okay until the end of the month, right?" He asked.

"Yes, they should be fine. Now to conclude our business." The shopkeeper started to write him up a receipt. Harry winced a little bit at the cost, but quickly started to count out the coins he needed. He had just enough. Thankfully, Ron was too busy looking over some ingredients in the corner to see how much it had cost. He would need to get some more gold out of his vault. He'd spent nearly every bit he'd brought. But that would simply give Hedwig something to do.

A bit later, after a stop at The Three Broomsticks for a quick takeout order Harry and Ron found themselves walking down the main street in Hogsmeade. The town was bustling a bit more than usual.

Harry noticed some elder Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students waiting around and assumed they didn't face the same regulations as Hogwarts students. It must have been good for business in the town.

"So what ingredients were you looking for?" Harry asked Ron as the shops shifted into a more residential area.

"Oh. I was reading about this potion that supposedly makes you irresistible to girls," Ron blushed as he spoke.

"And where did you find this potion?" Harry found the idea amusing. It sounded rather like a tabloid.

"Oh it was at the back of one of the magazines we have a subscription for because of the tournament," Ron replied quickly. The response did just make it seem more like a tabloid.

"And you think that actually works?" Harry asked.

"Well, love potions do. It can't be that much different, right?" Ron asked. Harry wasn't sure if his friend was joking or not.

"Those are also illegal, you realize," Harry responded.

"Yes, they are. But it's not like you're going to turn me in," Ron joked. Harry shook his head.

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Harry laughed. He noticed a shaggy black dog approach from one of the yards.

"Hey Snuffles," Ron said as the dog trotted up to them. Sirius barked once and led them to a path which eventually brought them to a mountain cave. As he shifted back, Harry handed him the carryout.

"Thanks, Harry," Sirius said as he eagerly dived into the fried fish.

"No problem, Sirius," Harry responded, setting his bag down in the corner of the cave. He opened it and began to rummage through it as Sirius ate.

"Oh and Ron. That potion you were discussing earlier. What were the ingredients in it?" Sirius asked with a mouthful of food.

"Uhm. Let me think," Ron said. He paused for a moment before listing the ingredients. Sirius was smirking after the first two ingredients, and broke out laughing when Ron finished listing all of them.

"Oh that will certainly make you irresistible to girls," Sirius managed to say while still laughing and eating. Harry was rather impressed.

"Really?" Ron asked staring at the fugitive with complete disbelief.

"Oh yes. But likely not in the way that you expect."

"Well what does it do?"

"Oh mostly prankish things. Like double your ear size, make all your hair fall out, and bind your legs together. It sounds like it would prevent you from speaking, too. Of course, with some of the other ingredients you listed, those would likely be the least of your problems. Some things are best just not mixed. End result would be what it said though. You'd be irresistible to look at. And probably irresistible not to laugh at too," Sirius explained between bouts of laughter.

"That would be rather unpleasant," Harry said from the corner. He was fighting back the urge to laugh as well. Ron flushed a deep crimson and moved over behind Harry. He didn't speak for a few moments, and changed the topic when he finally did.

"What did you bring?" Ron asked, gazing over his shoulder.

"Just some stuff from the twins that Sirius wanted to see," Harry responded, pulling things out and starting to line them up on one of the rocks in the cave.

"What did they give you?" Sirius asked. It took Harry a minute to realize just what Sirius said, as his mouth was full of food.

"Just looks to be everything that they talked about. I'm not sure what most of it is just by glance," Harry admitted.

"I can tell what they are," Ron said, he then started to identify each of the objects Harry placed on the rock. After a few moments he'd identified and defined every item the twins had sent.

"Well done. It's a good thing Harry brought you along," Sirius said. Ron flushed at the compliment.

Once Sirius finished eating they tested each of the products. That hadn't gone quite according to plan. The cave was caked with various nastiness by the time the time they had finished But at least it only took Sirius a few minutes and Harry's wand to clean up all the fake blood and vomit from the various Skiving Snackboxes.

"Well, those were certainly some of the most interesting things I've tried lately," Sirius said. Harry couldn't help but wonder just how many prank items his godfather had sampled since prison, but he didn't comment.

"I'll tell them you said that," Ron responded.

"Anything else the twins should know?" Harry asked.

"No. They're in the right direction. They're going to need a few more items before they'll be able to successfully launch. But they have time," Sirius said.

"I'll let them know that, too," Ron said. Harry couldn't help but think Ron was trying to gain a larger role in the twins business. Then again, maybe he just wanted to feel important.

"Good. Now, Harry have you figured out the second task yet?" Sirius asked.

"Yea. That's the reason I came to Hogsmeade today. Snuck out to buy some Gillyweed," Harry admitted.

"So the task is underwater?"

"Yea. The egg contained a message that would only play with water running into it that something would be taken from me, and I'd have an hour to find it."

"And you're sure the Gillyweed will last for an hour?"

"No. But I bought more than I think I'll need and I'm going to test it before the task. If it doesn't, I'll buy more. I had the shopkeeper separate it by duration, so I hope he's right. I plan on bringing enough to last for more than an hour. I think I'm going to attempt to learn the Bubble-Head charm, too. But I'm not sure how effective it would be when cast underwater," Harry explained.

"It's incredibly ineffective," Sirius said. "Cast on the surface or not at all, really. But it's a good charm to know in a pinch. Here, give me your wand. I'll show you how to do it." Harry handed his wand over and Sirius demonstrated the charm quickly by showing the motions and making Harry repeat the incantation. It only took Harry a few attempts to cast the charm effectively. He could immediately see why Fred and George suggested against this method. It felt flimsy as he moved around the cave. After a few moments he removed it.

"Well I think I can figure it out from there. I'll probably practice it a bit more. It may come in handy either way," Harry said.

"Yes," Sirius responded. "It never hurts a bit to know more. And you don't know what the final task will be. What's your plan for the lake then?"

"I figured I'd take my wand and that knife you gave me for Christmas and just look around. I'm not sure how spells work underwater, though," Harry admitted.

"Most work the same, although they can be a bit slower. I'd stick with stunners for the most part. If you can get behind anything, that'll work better," Sirius said.

"That's good to know," Harry responded.

"Yes. Now I read a Skeeter article that said you were quite the ladies man. Who's the flavor of the month?" Sirius teased.

"No one," Harry laughed. "I should probably read that article. I just danced with a bunch of friends at the ball but she turned it into that."

"Well you must be a well sought after bachelor. Rumor is this Miss Greengrass has her hooks in you at the moment. Any truth to that?" Sirius asked.

"She's fun. But no, not really," Harry said.

"Come on, you need to get yourself a girl," Sirius teased.

"Working on it," Harry glared at Sirius, a little annoyed by the line of questioning.

"Same girl as before?" Sirius asked.

"Yes," Harry responded.

"Need some advice?"

"Probably," Harry admitted.

"Well your father was always the slow and steady type. Took him forever to woo your mother. And I really mean forever."

"I'm not sure I have forever with her. She is leaving at the end of the year."

"Well that could be a problem. You could always take my approach," Sirius smirked.

"And that would be?"

"Go right after her, of course," Sirius laughed.

"I'm not sure she should appreciate that. She's part Veela, she'd just think I was charmed."

"A French Veela? Damn Harry, you have high tastes," Sirius said. "You sure you're just not interested in her because of the aura?" Harry just glared at him.

"I'm sure." Harry said.

"Well then a mix would be the best. Let her know you're interested, but don't push it." Sirius said.

"She thinks I'm just a kid," Harry responded.

"Well you are," Ron said. Sirius ignored him.

"Then be her friend and wait for a moment to arise between the two of you. When that comes, don't miss your chance," Sirius advised.

"But how will I know when that happens?" Harry said.

"You won't. You'll have a split second decision to make. And if you make it wrong, you'll know immediately that it's gone," Sirius said.

"That's helpful," Ron laughed.

"He's right," Harry responded.

"Well, you have a few months to figure it out," Sirius teased.

"Yea. But I'm worried that won't be enough time," Harry said.

"Then make sure it is," Sirius said. Harry had nothing else to say at that point. The three chatted quietly for a few hours before Harry and Ron had to head back to the castle.

The final weekend in February approached faster than Harry would have liked. He walked out to the lake that morning alone, wrapped in a heavy cloak to protect from the cold winds. He momentarily regretted the decision to simply wear the light swimming uniform they'd given him under his cloak. But oh well, there wasn't much he could do now without being late. He just hoped there'd be plenty of towels to help him warm up after the task.

Harry had tested the Gillyweed shortly after he purchased it. The test was surprisingly productive. The shopkeeper hadn't lied about the portions either. The first package lasted exactly an hour. Harry had explored the lake for about a half hour before simply swimming around the surface, waiting to see how soon before it wore off. He was delightfully surprised to notice that the icy water didn't seem nearly as cold when he used the herb.

Of course, that was what allowed him to assume he wouldn't need to dress warmer for the task. So perhaps he shouldn't be praising

that development. Oh well, he was almost to the lake now. At least before someone distracted him by calling his name.

"Harry wait!" he recognized the voice so he stopped, but didn't turn to face her.

"Daphne," He said quietly as she caught up to him.

"You look like you're freezing! What are you even wearing under that?" She was completely bundled up, mostly in Slytherin colored things, but it was clear she was at least supporting the Hogwarts champions over the other two schools.

"Just the uniform they wanted me to wear," Harry responded.

"But it's freezing out!"

"I'll be fine once I'm in the lake."

"In the lake? The lake has to be freezing!"

"It is. But I've got that taken care of," He said. She looked at him for a moment. He could tell from her expression that she didn't think there was a chance he truly had that taken care of. But after a moment of thought, she decided not to press that issue.

"Fine, but what if you freeze to death before the task even begins?" Daphne asked, crossing her arms over her chest in a way that suggested no answer he could give would be adequate.

"Well, then I guess I'll be the only champion to die while not even participating in a task?" Harry suggested.

"You joke too much," Daphne responded crossly.

"Well, it's that or complain that I'm freezing. Joking seemed like the better option," Harry admitted. Again, Daphne paused for a moment.

"You really are nothing like the rumors they spread about you," she said.

"That's good to know. But I imagine most people aren't," he responded. She was silent for a moment. He turned to continue walking toward the lake.

"Wait," she said. Harry turned back toward her and saw she was taking off her green and silver scarf. She stepped up closer to him and wrapped the scarf expertly around his neck. He immediately felt warmer, and it smelled rather like her. Both were nice attributes.

"Thanks," he said.

"No problem. I'm just returning the favor for the cloak before," She responded. They started to walk toward the lake. Harry realized, as they walked in silence on the chilly February day, that he could be quite happy with Daphne, if he wanted to be. She was nice, she was fun, she was pretty, and she liked him. The problem was that it wasn't Daphne that his mind lingered on. Maybe if things didn't work out he would pursue the Slytherin witch. But he wasn't ready to simply give up on Fleur.

The pair kept walking, slowly, toward the lake. Daphne stuck close to his side, blocking a great majority of the wind from hitting him. It was a rather nice gesture, even if the slender girl didn't block out much of the wind. They were silent until they made it to the lake.

"Well, I have to go down over there now," Harry said, nodding toward where the judges and sponsors waited.

"It looks like you do. Wonder how we're going to actually be able to watch this event?" Daphne asked, gazing out over the lake.

"I have no idea. But I'm sure they'll have thought about that," Harry replied.

"Looks that way. There's stands all around the lake," Daphne said. Harry looked around the lake and noticed the grandstands.

"Yea but the water will really obstruct the view," he commented.

"Probably. We'll find out though. Well, I'll find out. You'll be too busy swimming around," she responded.

"Yes. You will. Do you want your scarf back?" he asked. She looked at him for a moment.

"No. I should be fine. Keep it as a memento. And, you know what. Take this for luck, too." She leaned forward and kissed him very softly on the lips. Harry kissed her back, lightly.

"Those are lucky?" he asked when she pulled away.

"We're about to find out," She shrugged. "At the very least I get to steal another kiss before you run off with the French witch." Harry wasn't sure how to respond to that. He could feel the blush rise in his face. It didn't help that Daphne simply laughed.

"Well thanks," was all Harry could think of to say.

"You're welcome. Good luck, Harry," she responded before turning and walking off toward the stands.

He walked the final distance toward the judges and sponsors. He was the last champion to arrive, losing out to Krum by less than a minute. As soon as he showed up Ludo Bagman pulled him aside.

"You all ready to go, Harry?" he asked. "Got everything planned?"

"Uhm, yea. I'm good," Harry replied.

"You sure. Need any last minute advice?" Bagman asked. Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Aren't judges supposed to be impartial?" he asked. Bagman didn't seem phased in the slightest.

"Perhaps. But the tournaments are never fair. Are you sure there's nothing you need?" Bagman asked again.

"I'm sure," Harry said, moving himself away from Ludo despite the judge's attempts to lure him back. The first person he ran into was Fleur.

"Oh, 'Arry! Good I was sent to find you," She said. She, like him, appeared to have simply thrown a large warm coat on over her uniform.

"Good, they're ready to start?" he asked.

"Zey should be in a minute. Zey want us over there for pictures," she tilted her head to indicate the direction.

"Alright. Let's go," he said and they moved over to the corner where they were forced to disregard their warm cloaks and stand in their uniforms while a series of reporters snapped group and individual pictures. It was painfully cold, but the champions did their best to not look like they were completely and utterly frozen. When that was finally done Bagman joined them on a large magical raft that slowly moved out to the center of the lake.

Harry moved to the edge of the raft and looked down at the water. He couldn't see anything in the water.

"Are you ready?" Fleur asked behind him.

"Yea. I think so. You?" he responded.

"I believe I am," she responded. "Although I do not enjoy water."

"I don't either. Too many bad memories," Harry responded, remembering Dudley forcing his head underwater.

"Do you wish to talk about it?" she asked.

"No," Harry laughed. "Maybe some day. But not before diving into that black abyss as part of the Triwizard Tournament. Why, do you want to talk about it?"

"Zair is not much to talk about. I just do not like water or swimming," she responded.

"Good enough," Harry said. He turned to face her as the raft stopped. After a moment the champions were gathered up. Harry watched Bagman perform the charm to enhance his voice.

"Ladies and Gentlemen!" Bagman exclaimed. "Welcome to the second task of the Triwizard Tournament! For this task we've snatched something valuable from the champions! They will have an

hour, on my signal, to find it in the lake and bring it back to the surface.

"That may seem simple. But the lake has been filled with all manners of aquatic beasts! They will face issues at every corner! And on top of that, none of the champions know where the items are being held! They will need a fair bit of luck to complete this task.

"But now, to address the concerns many of you have had. I see many of you staring at the water, no doubt wonder how you will see anything during the task! Judges, if you would?" Bagman gestured to the judges who each appeared to cast a spell. Harry saw the water start to clear considerably.

"Each champion will also be marked. Miss Delacour will be blue!" Bagman paused and cast a quick spell on her. "Mr. Krum will be red. Mr. Diggory will be yellow, and Mr. Potter will be green." Bagman cast the rest of the spells on each champion.

"Do not worry, either. The spells placed on the lake only work for people looking at the lake. Everything will still be dark for our champions! Now, the four of you. Your hour begins!" Bagman pulled a large pocket watch out of his pocket and stared at it for a few seconds. "Now!" They scattered. Krum and Diggory were off the raft in a blink. Fleur took longer to slip into the water. Harry paused, caught momentarily off guard. But he recovered quickly and pulled out the first piece of Gillyweed. He threw it into his mouth, then took Sirius's knife and his wand and dove into the icy water.

For the briefest of moments he thought the Gillyweed had failed. He only had a couple of short spare amounts in his pocket, so he decided to surface and attempt the Bubble-Head charm. But as he swam up the water seemed to warm, and he felt the gills form on his neck.

He inhaled the water quickly, marveling at the strange feeling as his lungs pulled the oxygen from it. It felt like nothing he could really explain. When he first tried it, he'd assumed he was drowning and immediately tried to surface. That had simply resulted in a searing pain in his lungs while he attempted to gasp for air. So he'd thrown himself back underwater and tried to breathe again. The closest he could get to describing it was that it felt almost like drinking and breathing at the same time. Of course, he didn't particularly care

what it felt like, as long as in an hour he was alive, back in possession of whatever was stolen from him, and out of the water.

It took a moment to orient himself. Once his eyes adjusted to the darkness he grabbed his wand in one hand and the knife in the other. He immediately regretted not brining his wand or the knife when he tested the Gillyweed. The slight webbing in his hands made each more difficult to hold than he'd expected. But he'd make do.

He couldn't tell which direction the other champions had picked. Nor could he see much ahead of him. He paused for just a moment, before picking a direction and swimming off in it. It only took him a few minutes to realize the folly of that. He highly doubted that whatever was taken would be simply held in suspension in the middle of the lake. He swam to the bottom as quickly as he could.

Harry paused for a moment to simply look around. He had, at the very best, ten meters of good visibility. The surrounding area was filled with different types of weeds and plants he couldn't identify. Nothing around him gave him any clue as to where the other champions were. He soon realized that nothing around him even gave the faintest indication of life.

He could only think of one way to determine which direction he needed to travel. Harry closed his eyes and took three deep, watery breaths. He thought for a moment and then simply picked a direction and swam off in it. He kept himself a few meters off the ground as he scanned for anything that could serve as a hiding spot for the hostages.

He didn't find anything. Not a single living thing, excluding the plants. That seemed far, far too strange. But he could think of nothing better to do than simply keep swimming. Unfortunately, he soon ran into the edge of the lake.

Harry paused to think of which direction he had been going. He assumed east, but he hadn't particularly focused on it when he started swimming. He could imagine the people watching above laughing at him as he was obviously nowhere near the target goal and was instead just floating around staring at the edge of the lake.

He turned and set off at a different angle, hoping it would lead him somewhere closer to the target destination. Still, he saw nothing that

looked very promising. But he could think of nothing better to do than keep swimming.

Eventually, something in the distance caught his eye. It appeared to be a large ruin. Collapsed marble columns littered the bed of the lake. He couldn't really describe the building, but it reminded him of some sort of a temple. At the very least it looked like it needed to be investigated.

Swimming closer to it didn't reveal anything too important at first. Nothing particular stood out on the exterior. There were some symbols carved into the stones that he did not recognize. They appeared to be some sort of hieroglyphic. He spent a few minutes trying to figure out what they were for, but decided that was a waste of his precious time.

Harry circled the ruins once, simply to examine it from all angles, knowing full well he'd have to enter it if he wanted to accomplish anything productive. He took another deep, watery breath before working up the courage to swim into the dark ruins.

Inside it was even darker. He could see very little that wasn't directly in front of his face. He swam forward before deciding that was futile. The place was too small to hide whatever had been taken without there being some type of indication. He paused in the middle of the small room and raised his wand.

"Lumos," he muttered, a bubbly sort of sound came out, but his wand lit up anyway. He was right. There wasn't anything in the ruins aside from some rubble. He looked around for a few moments to make sure he hadn't missed anything. As he looked around he felt a shiver run up his spine. That seemed odd, as he hadn't noticed anything, temperature wise, since using the Gillyweed.

He turned and found himself staring at one of the ugliest creatures he'd ever seen. It had brown skin, two long and very brittle looking arms, which each had long and brittle looking fingers, and it had tentacles. Lots and lots of tentacles. It used the tentacles to float in the water, and it also had some protruding out of its odd shaped head that Harry could see no practical use for. It also had slanted eyes and Harry would have sworn it was smirking at him. Which was rather disheartening as it showed a row of small, sharp teeth. He recognized it as a grindylow almost immediately.

Harry raised his arm to combat it, but it reached out and grabbed onto his arm, pushing it out of the way and not letting it go. Harry couldn't get the angle to cast on the creature as it forced itself toward him, biting at him. He struggled to move his arm, but it had little effect. The creature was surprisingly strong and it had caught him off guard. He tried to stay away from its sharp teeth as the creature attempted to move closer to him, while still holding his arm out of the way. Apparently it was intelligent enough to realize that the wand was indeed a threat.

He couldn't think of what to do. He knew he had to break its grip somehow, Professor Lupin had made that point clear in the lesson. He couldn't help but think of how disappointed Lupin would be that he was bested by a creature he'd been taught to defend himself from. He brought his other hand around and tried to mash the things fingers with his fist. But it anticipated his strikes, and shifted its grip appropriately, all the while still trying to bite into him.

That's when he remembered what was in his other hand. The grindyflow had not recognized the knife as a threat. It was clearly far more concerned about the wand than the knife. Still, Harry hesitated. There had to be another way. He'd really only intended to stun the thing when he saw it. Still, he wasn't about to be lunch for a grindyflow.

He relaxed his muscles and lifted his entangled arm as much as he could. The grindyflow took the bait and attempted to press itself as close to his chest as he could. Harry wrapped his free arm around it and pressed the dagger toward its back.

The creature cried out. A painfully shrill shriek. Its grip loosened on his arm and with one quick smash from his free fist he was free of it. He pulled the dagger back and swam away from the grindyflow, pointing his wand at the creature. It stared at him, obviously furious, for just a moment before fleeing. Harry followed it out of the ruins, but didn't stalk it any further than that. Instead he simply rubbed his sore wrist for a few moments, before swimming off. He didn't know where the grindyflow was going, but he knew that Merpeople often domesticated them. So he figured following the blood trail was likely a good bet.

Disappointingly, the trail thinned after a while, before Harry found a dead grindyelow on the floor of the lake. He couldn't help but feel bad for the creature, even though it was trying to kill him. He didn't have time to do more than give it a quick nod, and wish it the best on its trip to wherever grindyelows went after their death.

But that did mean his best shot at a trail was dead in a heap at his feet. He couldn't come up with a plan that was better than simply continuing in the direction that the creature had been traveling. So, after the briefest of pauses, he kept swimming.

He wasn't certain how much time had passed. His best guess was about a half hour. He had to admit, he was terrified. He couldn't help but feel that he hadn't accomplished anything yet, and that angered him.

But he kept swimming. There was little more that he could do.

Thankfully, he started to hear something. At first it was too faint for him to make out. In fact, it was so faint he assumed he was just imagining it. But as he kept swimming in that direction it grew louder and louder. And the louder it grew, the faster he forced himself to swim.

Harry had to admit that Titus had been right, too. The merperson singer did sound rather attractive. He'd have to make a joke about that later.

A few hundred meters later he saw a ravine appear at the bottom of the lake in front of him. He swam toward it and saw the merfolk village beneath him. A great deal of the merfolk were circled around a large plinth in the middle of the village. Even from the distance, Harry could see people were tied to the stone. He swam toward it, fully expecting to have to fight the merfolk.

But they made no move to challenge him. They simply watched him approach. One even pulled a leashed grindyelow away from him. He nodded his thanks and could have sworn that the creature nodded back at him. It didn't take him long to approach the stone plinth. When he finally arrived at it he noticed just what was tied to it.

At first he saw Cho Chang, her head falling lazily to one side. Harry would have assumed she was already dead, but there was a steady

stream of bubbles coming from her mouth as she breathed. He swam around to the object and next saw a young, silvery-blond haired girl. The only thought he spared her was that she looked remarkably like her older sister. He swam around again.

Harry nearly dropped his knife and wand as he saw Hermione helplessly tied to the stone. His first urge was to immediately save his friend. But he knew he should check the final part of the stone.

But his heart nearly stopped as he saw Ron Weasley chained to the rock. He swallowed hard. It occurred to him he would likely miss Hermione just as much as Ron if he were to lose them. He didn't know which was his was his to save. Of course, he wanted to save all four.

He moved quickly to Cho and brought Sirius's knife to the knot that positioned her on the stone. A moment later a trident found his throat.

"You only take your hostage," the merperson said, moving the trident from his throat, toward Ron. Well, that at least solved the problem of which was his hostage.

He looked back toward Ron and felt the same pang in his chest. He imagined having to tell Arthur and Molly that Ron had died in the lake, because he had been unable to save his friend. Really his brother. Harry knew, deep down, that Ron represented exactly what he'd told Fleur he'd miss. A family.

Still, he turned back to the merperson and spoke.

"But they're all my friends. I don't want them to be hurt." It came out a bubbly mess, but the creature seemed to understand it.

"That does not matter, Champion Potter. You only save your hostage. Those are the rules," it explained coldly. Harry opened his mouth to argue when he saw Cedric Diggory approach.

The Hufflepuff wasted no time. He swam right toward Cho, completely ignoring the merpeople. Cedric untied her with an astonishing quickness and raced off as if some demon was on his tail.

It only took Harry a few moments to realize that demon was some kind of giant shark. And it was swimming directly after Cedric. Except now it was a shark with Krum's body. He swam quickly to Hermione and started to bite at her ropes. Harry hit him in the ribs and offered Sirius's knife. The shark-man took that, cut Hermione free, and handed it back to Harry, swimming off with her without a word. Harry couldn't help but wonder if he could even speak as a shark.

Of course, he realized that such idle speculation was simply wasting precious time. He looked around, hoping for any sign of Fleur. But he saw nothing. He knew the hour had to be almost up. He couldn't wait forever. He had to make a decision. The merfolk singing changed their song to make it seem like he only had minutes remaining.

Harry made his decision then. It wasn't even a hard one. Ron represented the family he never had. He represented the frightening possibility of losing a family again. But this time, losing a family while he could feel and remember the pain.

Yet on the other side of the stone was the exact same thing. Gabrielle, yes, that was her name. He recalled it from one of Fleur's letters. She too represented the family he didn't know. She also represented the family he wished he could have, every bit as much as Ron did. And frankly, he cared far too much about her older sister to simply leave the girl tied to the rock.

Harry realized that he meant that too. He really did care for Fleur. Far more than he'd cared for anything ever before, with the possible exception of Ron and Hermione. He was not about to let some stupid task in some stupid tournament prevent her from being happy, even if it meant he had to fight the entire merpeople village to get her sister out of the lake.

Of course, his epiphany wasted precious time.

He moved to Ron and he quickly cut his friend loose. He grabbed the red-head by the arm and pulled him over toward Gabrielle. He quickly cut her loose too, with the result of having the trident pressed once again to his neck.

"We told you. Only one hostage," the merperson said. Harry slowly pocketed the knife, as non-threateningly as he could.

"Are you going to kill one of the champions?" he taunted. For some reason he just didn't think the creature would harm him. Yes, people had died in the tournaments before, but something like this would certainly end poorly for merpeople in general. The merperson didn't seem to have an answer for that. Harry raised his wand. If he weren't underwater he'd be sweating against the metal on his neck.

"We do not need to kill to prevent you from taking both," the merperson responded. Harry leaned back, away from the trident. The merperson seemed to think he was backing away, so it lowered the trident. Harry took that advantage.

"Stupefy," he said, pointing his wand square at the merperson's chest. It slumped over, dropping the trident. He saw two more swim toward him and he quickly stunned those as well. Harry then spun around and looked at the remaining merpeople. None of them appeared like they would challenge him, so he put his wand away before grabbing one of Ron's hands, and one of Gabrielle's hands, holding on as best he could with his slightly-webbed fingers.

He swam upward, toward the surface. He knew his hour was nearly up. He tried to make his air last as long as possible. He knew the Gillyweed would run out very soon. He kept swimming up as quickly as he could, pulling the two bodies with him. They seemed to get heavier and heavier the closer he got to the light of the surface.

But he pressed on. He knew he had no choice. He attempted to gasp for one last breath of watery air, but the gills were gone. He felt his chest tighten. It wouldn't be long now, he knew. He'd either drown, or get them to the surface. Drowning would be worth it, he thought, as long as he saved the other two.

He felt dizzy. Everything felt wrong. Everything started to feel cold again. And everything was going completely dark.

But then everything changed. He could breathe and it was bright. Too bright. He gasped, over and over, feeling the air as it entered his lungs. Harry pulled Ron and Gabrielle above the water and onto the platform he was near. The other champions were huddled under towels there. And there was a great deal of noise.

He barely registered being wrapped in the towel, or being fed the Pepperup potion. It was Ron who spoke first.

"Why'd you bring the French girl?" he asked.

"I didn't want her to get hurt," Harry said dumbly. "And Fleur hadn't shown up."

"You would," Ron laughed. "We weren't in danger, Harry." Harry blinked.

"Well that figures," he said dryly. Rising to his feet. He wobbled a little bit, but it felt good to stand. He saw Fleur talking to Gabrielle, looking incredibly relieved. He couldn't help but eavesdrop on her conversation.

"Ze grindylows, zey swarmed me! I am so sorry, Gabrielle! Zey popped my bubble. I thought I was drowning!" The little French girl seemed too dazed to register her older sister's words. But they hugged, and everything seemed to be okay. He saw that Fleur's uniform was torn in several spots. And that she had cuts on her face as well as ugly bruises on her arms. In fact, the bruises looked very similar to the one developing on his arm from where the Grindylow grabbed him. He didn't want to imagine facing one of those creatures without being able to breathe.

"She's pretty beat up," Ron said as he pulled himself to his feet as well. Harry could only nod. Fleur looked over and saw him then. He gave her a weak smile and a brief nod. She moved quickly over him.

"Arry! You saved 'er! She was not your to save but you saved 'er anyway!" She then leaned forward and kissed him once on his left cheek, and then once on his right cheek. He knew he should say something, he knew he should do something. Everything seemed to slow down for those few moments. He could still feel her soft lips on his cheek as she moved away.

He'd missed it. He realized. That was the kind of thing Sirius had spoken of. That was the moment he'd needed to act on. Harry felt his stomach drop. He knew he wouldn't get a chance like that. Perhaps it simply wasn't meant to be. No, he couldn't believe that.

"And you 'elped!" he heard her say to Ron. He watched as she kissed Ron on the left cheek, and then the right as well. His friend's face quickly matched his hair.

"Yea, a bit," Ron muttered. And then Fleur turned back to Harry and everything seemed to slow.

"And you saved 'er!" she said again, leaning forward and kissing him again on the left cheek. He knew what to do next. Perhaps, as with Daphne, he got one mulligan. Regardless, he was going to take his chance. She moved in to kiss his right cheek, but her lips never got there.

Harry shifted his head, closed his eyes, and pressed his lips against hers. Fleur tensed immediately, becoming almost defensively rigid.

He heard the gasp from the crowd. Followed by the silence as everyone around contemplated what they saw. Followed by the mutterings from annoyed and disappointed students.

Still, she didn't move. He traced his tongue over her lips, thankful he had some practice, his arms slid protectively around her, his eyes remained closed. Blood pounded in his veins, he could hear his own heartbeat.

He didn't know how much time passed. It felt like hours, but he was sure it wasn't more than a second or two. But after that, Fleur's mouth opened, her lips parting wonderfully against his, as she kissed him back.

Author's Note: And finally back to the tournament as a whole. This chapter stayed pretty much according to the original plan, excluding the bits with Daphne, which were added in. I've very little to say about it, to be honest.

On a related note, I recently re-planned the final chapters of this. It rounds out at 19 chapters, so around 50,000 more words, if things stick to the plan. I have no intention of writing a sequel. Edit: Coincidentally, this chapter was finished on Friday, but due to errors it isn't posted until today. is still having those errors, but I think I've figured out a way around it. But, this weekend I did start the other story. The first chapter is at about 7500 words. Expect that as soon

as I can create new stories. I should still be able to complete the next chapter of Letters within the week, too.

Also I'm probably going to go back and clean up chapter 1-4. But I likely won't change any of the content, just clean them up a bit more. If I do, I'll make a comment on the next update. That's also something that may have to wait until the story is complete.

Next up is the second quidditch match, Hogwarts v. Beauxbatons. I may write the first chapter of a different story instead, simply because I feel doing so will help with the next couple of chapters here.

Regardless, I hope you enjoy the update. Thanks for all the reviews, I appreciate every last one. As per usual, the best way to contact me is likely by private message, although I believe my e-mail is public in my profile, too. Just make sure the subject is something I'll notice.

Thanks again.

Chapter 14

Flight

The events following the second task were a blur. Harry remembered Fleur sliding away from him. She didn't spare him anything more than a curious glance before working back to her family. He also remembered someone telling him his scores. They were pretty good. He'd received points for being stupid enough to assume that the hostages were in mortal peril. But he'd lost points for initiating an attack on Merpeople.

He disagreed heartily with that last point, as the trident to the throat felt like ample cause to cast a few stunning spells. Karkaroff and Maxime had disagreed. He didn't care, though. He was only a point behind Cedric with one task to go. For the first time he thought about winning the tournament, and simply not trying to survive.

The sponsors and judges didn't mention what the final task was. The only reference to it was that they would find out soon enough. Of course, he managed to avoid the whole post-task interview by having his housemates swarm him. So that was a plus.

He barely had the time to throw his robe back on over the towels he was wrapped in before a horde of Gryffindors swarmed him on the shore of the lake. He was cheered and pushed through the crowd, being moved quickly toward the castle. He'd forgotten the scarf he wrapped around his neck was green and silver, as well. But the fact didn't escape his housemates.

"What's with the serpent scarf?" Colin Creevey asked as what appeared to be the entire Gryffindor house escorted him back to the common room. Harry really had no interest in another party with his housemates. He wanted to go and find Fleur. But he knew he'd been pushed far away from the French witch. And he doubted she was in the mood for a party right now. He hoped she was at least having fun with her parents and sister. He'd have liked to meet them.

"He's dating Daphne Greengrass," Katie Bell said, rather snottily. He was? Why was he the last one informed of this. "It's probably her scarf. I'm sure she's very thrilled he kissed the French champion."

"Why did he do that if he's dating Daphne?" Colin asked, looking incredibly confused. Harry opened his mouth, intending to refute the statement, but Angelina Johnson spoke over him.

"He was probably just overcome by her aura," she said. Harry again was going to debate that point, but the conversation continued without him.

"Her what?" Colin asked.

"You haven't noticed, Colin, how you want to do anything for her whenever she's around?" Katie asked. Again, she sounded rather irritated.

"I don't know," Colin said. "She's not really around me much." Harry debated opening his mouth to comment that whenever she was around him he certainly didn't want to do anything she wanted.

"Oh, and you don't notice how every boy looks at her the second she enters a room?" Angelina asked, scrutinizing the younger student.

"Uhm. Not really," Colin said, blushing a bit and looking confused. Harry was starting to feel bad for the kid, so he decided to really just interrupt now, despite the fact that he knew they'd try to talk over him.

"Enough. I didn't kiss Fleur because I was enamored by her aura," Harry said. "And I'm not dating Daphne Greengrass."

"I told you," Katie said. "He may have taken her to the ball, but he's not about to date a Slytherin!"

"That's not true," Harry said weakly.

"What?" Katie asked.

"If it wasn't for Fleur I'd probably date Daphne," Harry admitted.

"But she's a Slytherin," Angelina commented, as if that ended any possible debate.

"And I'm a Gryffindor," Harry said, intending to point out how little that really mattered.

"Yes, so you shouldn't date a Slytherin," Katie said. "You should date a Gryffindor instead."

"Asked them, they were all busy," Harry responded dryly. "But regardless, I'm not dating Daphne Greengrass."

"But you kissed her. And you're wearing her scarf." Katie said.

"I kissed Fleur, too. Am I dating her now? Do I have some strange harem triad thing going on? Does Fleur get Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and Daphne the other four days? Hell, I could kiss you right now, Katie. Would we be dating?" He was getting slightly annoyed about the line of questioning. Katie blushed furiously at his comment, but she recovered quickly.

"Would you want to date me, Harry?" she asked, batting her eyes at him. He paused for a moment. Harry hadn't thought about that before. Sure, Katie was pretty enough, and fun to be around when they were on the house team together. But no, he didn't really want to date her. He wanted to date Fleur.

"It could be fun, Katie. But I'm trying for Fleur," He said as diplomatically as he could. Apparently it was the wrong answer.

"Oh I see. Not interested because I'm not a Veela?" She scoffed.

"That's not it, Katie," He said. "I just really like Fleur. And it's not because she's a Veela. It's because she's kind, caring, a fierce competitor, and is helpful and nice!" Harry argued. He realized a bunch of those fit Katie as well, but that wasn't the point.

"And you know all of that how?" Katie crossed her arms, looking skeptical.

"That's a good question," Angelina commented.

"She was his pen pal," Colin said. Harry blinked and looked over at the younger boy.

"How did you know that?" he asked. He certainly didn't remember telling many people who his pen pal was, nor did he remember simply talking about it in public.

"I asked Hermione who your pen pal was. She told me," Colin said. Harry nodded a little bit. He could picture that conversation readily enough. The over enthusiastic Colin trying to learn everything he could about Harry, even after three years in the school. Hermione probably just told him because she figured it would get him to leave her alone. Still, no harm no foul.

"Wait, the French Veela was your summer assignment?" Angelina asked.

"Yes. She was. We kept writing into the school years. I promised to write her more often too. But with the quidditch and the tournament I haven't really gotten around to it," Harry admitted.

"You idiot," Katie said.

"What?" Harry asked.

"She's probably furious with you then. You can't promise to write her more letters then just not!" Katie looked completely aghast. They were in the common room by then. A party had started without them. Harry received various congratulations from many of his housemates, but was quickly dragged back into conversation with Katie and Angelina.

"Wait, that's bad?" He asked.

"Of course. She was probably waiting for your letters and they never came. Total asshole move, Harry," Angelina said.

"Shit," Harry said. "I never thought about that."

"Obviously," Katie responded.

"And she's probably furious that you just kissed her in public too. Not only did you ruin the super-romantic first kiss moment with anyone, but you failed to realize that there was pretty much nothing else she could do other than kiss you back!" Angelina said. Harry hadn't thought about it. "And why did you decide to do it anyway?"

"Erm. No. I hadn't thought of that," Harry said. "And I got advice from a friend. He said to take an opportunity if I found one. To make her not think of me as a kid. I thought that worked."

"Who gave you that advice? That's not at all what women want!" Angelina said.

"It sounds like something that Titus Button character would have suggested. Apparently he's been with half of Slytherin. Fancies himself to be quite accomplished with the ladies," Katie said.

"I've heard of him," Angelina said. Harry just shrugged as the two girls conversed. He didn't particularly know much about Titus. He seemed to be into Tracey, but he saw very little interaction between the two. Angelina and Katie continued to debate about the Slytherin. Somehow it had changed from an annoyance that he claimed to be good with women, to the two agreeing that they wouldn't mind to have him alone in a broom closet for a while. Needless to say, Harry didn't quite understand that.

"Wait a second," he said after he decided he really didn't want to be a part of that conversation any longer. "Weren't you both annoyed a minute ago that I was pursuing Fleur?"

"Yes," Angelina said. "But then you said you were her pen pal."

"How does that change anything?" Harry asked. He was completely and utterly confused. Women were complicated.

"Well you see, before we just assumed it was the aura. But if you really were in communication well before you knew about it then it becomes so much more romantic!" Katie said.

"And if it was the aura then you'd have probably written a letter a day," Angelina said.

"I never thought about that," Harry said.

"I get the feeling there's a lot you haven't thought about, Harry," Angelina said.

"Probably," Harry responded, not knowing what else he should say. "I still don't really get it. But I'm really not interested in her because she's a Veela."

"I'll take your word for it," Katie said. "Of course, that still doesn't let you off the hook for hanging around with a Slytherin."

"Really?" Harry rolled his eyes. "Daphne is great. You'd probably like her if you ever hung out. She's happy and fun. And she hates Malfoy, so that has to count for something."

"Hardly," Angelina said. "Everyone in Slytherin hates Malfoy, except for Crabbe and Goyle and they probably do, but they're too stupid to realize that they do."

"Well regardless, she's nice. You'd like her," Harry said. The two girls looked at him skeptically.

"If you insist," Katie said. Harry knew that neither of them really had any interest in finding out whether or not he was right about that. It was a shame, really. But such was life. The girls started to converse about boys, and Harry knew that he missed any chance he'd had of getting advice from them on how to handle the situation with Fleur.

He walked away from Katie and Angelina when he realized that he didn't particularly want to hear which of the Hogwarts males had the best backside. Everyone he walked past offered him some sort of congratulation on the task, or wished him luck in the upcoming quidditch match. He smiled and thanked each person. Most of them by name, regardless of their year. He even had a few quick conversations with some of them, on a variety of topics.

It occurred to him that at the start of the year he'd have probably simply looked away and muttered something intended as a thank you under his breath, but now he was perfectly comfortable with the attention. He still didn't really want the attention. But he was comfortable enough to talk and smile now. He couldn't help but wonder what changed. He didn't think about it for long as he found Ron and Hermione a short time later.

"Hey guys," he said. Ron looked up and practically cheered.

"Harry! You kissed the Veela! What was that like!" He exclaimed. His friend found a butterbeer from nearby and offered it to Harry, who took it before answering.

"Soft, wet, and slightly salty," Harry recounted dryly.

"So no fruit punch?" Ron joked.

"No fruit punch," Harry smirked. "But in fairness she had been swimming around in a lake for a while. I'll need to try again to give a better example of the results." Ron laughed far more than that commented deserved.

"Fruit punch?" Hermione asked, looking up at the two boys. Naturally, she was reading some gigantic tome rather than joining in the party.

"Nothing," Harry said, but Ron spoke over him.

"I asked him what it was like to kiss Daphne and he said she tasted like fruit punch," Ron said in one breath. Harry glared at him.

"Oh," Hermione said, going back to her book. Harry looked down at her for a moment. He knew he probably shouldn't ask, but he couldn't resist.

"So, the thing international quidditch star Viktor Krum would miss the most. That's quite the honor," Harry teased.

"Quiet," Hermione said.

"Oh come now," Harry teased. "I thought you said things weren't serious. Next thing you'll tell me is that you're going to summer in Bulgaria with him."

"How did you know that?" Hermione asked, slamming the book shut and looking slightly alarmed.

"I didn't. But that's pretty cool," Harry said.

"You're going to spend your summer with Viktor Krum? That's awesome," Ron exclaimed. Harry looked over at him for a moment, and then looked back at Hermione.

"I haven't said whether or not I will. It would be fun but he has Quidditch nearly constantly, and I doubt my parents would let me stay with him," Hermione said.

"Well if you like him, it sounds like it could be fun," Harry said. "If you get the opportunity, I say go for it."

"Yes, but he's so much older than me. And I'm not sure if I'm ready for a serious relationship," Hermione said.

"Well, tell him that. I'm sure he'd still love to have you visit. And who knows what may change in six months," Harry said. "I know I'd do it with Fleur."

"You're male, of course you would. Oh, and you and Fleur have a relationship now?" Hermione teased. "After an awkward forced kiss?"

"Oh, you've kissed Krum more?" Harry asked.

"Indeed I have," Hermione responded dryly.

"You've kissed Viktor Krum? How was that?" Ron asked. Hermione opened her mouth to comment, but as she did the Weasley twins came over and started to ask Ron questions about something or other. Harry was glad they did, he didn't really want to know what kissing Viktor Krum was like. But still, something bothered him.

"What was up with him?" Harry asked.

"Oh. That. I told the twins how he'd been acting this year and they said they'd do something about it if he looked like he was going to get super jealous again," Hermione said.

"What did they do?"

"Well the second you kissed Fleur he got this strange look in his eyes, and then they both hit him with a Cheering Charm at the same time. And he's been like that ever since," she explained. Harry was glad he hadn't been drinking the butterbeer at the time.

"Oh that's too good," he said.

"I don't know. It seemed rather mean," Hermione admitted.

"I think it is classic," Harry countered. Hermione decided to change the subject.

"So how furious is Fleur?" she asked.

"Why does everyone think she's going to be mad?" Harry scowled.

"Because you grabbed her and forced her to kiss you," Hermione said. "Girls don't like that."

"Well, I thought it was nice," Harry said, crossing his arms.

"I'm sure you did, but that's not the point," Hermione said. "You removed her choice in the matter."

"She could have moved away," Harry said.

"The crowd probably would have reacted poorly to that," Hermione said.

"Well, maybe," Harry said. "But she doesn't strike me as the type to care overly much about what people think."

"Oh come on now, Harry," Hermione scolded him. "Everyone cares what other people think. Would you want to be booed and jeered by a crowd as large as that one was today? Because that's likely what would have happened had she simply pushed you away."

"I guess not," Harry said, looking down at his feet.

"Well you should keep that in mind when you finally talk to her. And I would suggest talking to her soon," Hermione said. Harry nodded a little bit. That sounded like good advice. He already knew what about he would say too. That he was carried away in the moment, but it wasn't her aura. He knew perfectly well what he was doing because he cared for her. He'd cared for her since she wrote him the letters over the summer. And he was sorry that he hadn't written to her since she'd been here. And that they hadn't spent much time together. Hopefully she would accept that.

"I will. I'll find her tomorrow after practice," Harry said. "Thanks Hermione. I really do think you should give Krum a chance. He's a pretty good bloke."

"From a school that wouldn't even accept me as a student, Harry," she responded. Harry felt she had a point. But then again he'd just argued that not all Slytherins were evil, so he should probably be willing to argue the same thing with Durmstrang students.

"People are different, Hermione. Just because he goes to Durmstrang doesn't mean he hates Muggle-Borns. He certainly doesn't act like he hates you. And he's been nothing but nice to me."

"So what, you think I should just run off with him?" She spoke rather sternly.

"No. But I don't think you should dictate any of your actions based on the fact that his school has a history of bigotry," Harry said.

"You're probably right. I don't know, though. I don't want to just be some quidditch groupie girlfriend. But I do like him." She said.

"Well, talk to him about it. If he doesn't understand, you'll know it wasn't meant to be. And if he does, then you'll work something out," Harry said, giving the most generic advice he was capable of thinking of.

"I know. But thanks, Harry," she said. He nodded and was going to comment further when Cormac McLaggen came up. The reserve keeper smiled a little too much at Hermione for Harry's comfort, but that was irrelevant.

"Hey Harry, Davies wants to do a quick scrimmage tonight to prep for tomorrow's match," Cormac said.

"You have to be kidding me. I'm exhausted," Harry complained.

"I know. But he needs you to play beater. I have to go find Alicia and the twins now," he said, moving off. Harry just groaned and made his way away from the party and toward the pitch.

Harry rather disliked playing beater. He'd have much rather been on one of the chaser lines, like Cho was. But he'd proven he was

significantly better with a beater's bat than she was, which made it seem closer to a real match. Still, he didn't do much. He mostly flew around, put himself near a bludger, and wacked it at Titus, who used it as a lethal weapon against Alicia, Lilly, and Ginny.

It was somewhat amusing. But it would have been more fun if he was better. It certainly didn't help any that he was exhausted, and his body hurt from swimming far below the lake for far too long. So mostly he floated by the hoops and chatted with Herbert while the chasers were in the other zone.

He could tell Roger was getting slightly annoyed with his behavior. But it was getting late, and he felt like he was dead. Every fiber of his being just wanted to crawl into bed and go to sleep.

When Titus was otherwise busy tracking down both of the bludgers like some kind of beating machine, Harry floated idly by the stands and chatted with some of the people who showed up to watch practice. Most notably Tracey and Daphne. Of course, Tracey was less than receptive of his presence.

"You're blocking my view of my boyfriend's ass, Potter," She spat at him as he flew by. He decided to float next to Daphne instead. She was silent for a moment, then looked up at him.

"Shouldn't you be playing?" she teased.

"Yes, I should be. But I feel like I'm going to fall off the broom, and every time I hit the bludger I feel like my arms are going to fall off," he said.

"Weakling," Daphne commented.

"Hey now. I've had a rather busy day," he said.

"So I noticed. Just this morning you were too cold to walk down to the lake. I had to give you a scarf," she teased. "Which I notice you aren't wearing now."

"It wouldn't go well with the uniform," Harry said. "And Roger probably wouldn't be happy with me for wearing a tie with the uniform."

"It doesn't look like Roger is particularly happy with you now, anyway," she said, glancing over to where the Captain had just scored. He flew past them, then.

"Get into the game Potter, or so help me I'll start Chang tomorrow," he said as he sped off. Harry just groaned.

"He's tense," Daphne said.

"Very. It's not helpful," Harry said. "I'll act like I care about being a beater for a few minutes, that should appease him." So he flew back up into the game.

It didn't particularly matter, though. Amazingly, Titus was more than fine playing by himself. Harry spent the majority of the time chasing after one of the bludgers, hoping it didn't turn and smash him square in the face. Whenever he finally caught it he just hit it in the general direction of either Titus, or an opposing group of chasers, and hoped for the best. Usually it didn't work out.

When his chaser side had a fifty point lead, he floated back down toward Daphne.

"My arms hurt more now," he said dumbly.

"Swimming all day and then hitting an iron ball around will do that to you," she responded dryly.

"You're right. It will," Harry responded. "But I would have preferred some sort of pity followed by a nice relaxing massage to sarcasm."

"Well, if you want to give me a massage, that's fine. But I'm not sure how that would help your arms. And I doubt the French witch would like that much."

"Probably not. Of course, everyone seems to think that she'll be furious with me for kissing her," Harry said. Strangely, it never even seemed like a faux pas to be talking about this with Daphne.

"Well she might be. I wouldn't be, though," Daphne said.

"You wouldn't?"

"Oh no. I'd have thought it was hot. You can grab me and kiss me whenever you like," Daphne said.

"I'm not sure the French witch would appreciate that," Harry said, figuring it was his turn to use that excuse.

"Probably not. You never know, she may get jealous and decide she wants you," Daphne said.

"For some reason I highly doubt that," Harry said.

"Oh? How would she react then?" Daphne asked.

"Knowing her? She'd probably gaze at me with an amused smile and feel happy for me," Harry admitted. She may come off as cold at times, but that was how he expected Fleur would have reacted to that situation.

"So, you're telling us that the French champion would react pretty much exactly how Daphne reacted when she saw you frenching the Frenchie?" Tracey asked. Harry noticed she had her arms crossed over her chest and still looked like she didn't care for his presence.

"That's how you reacted?" Harry said, looking over at Daphne.

"Pretty much," she admitted. "I was happy for you. I could tell, ever since I watched you dance with her at the ball, that you were hung up on her. I will admit, I hoped she'd slapped you, cursed you, and otherwise made a mockery of you so I could step in. Unfortunately not so much."

"So every Slytherin does really want something embarrassing to happen to me at any given moment?" Harry teased.

"Naturally," Daphne responded. "We're cunning, you see, and we tend to find ways to make those situations benefit us."

"And how would you have benefitted from that, Daphne?" Harry asked, although he had a feeling he already knew the answer to that question.

"That's easy. Granger was busy and Weasley is an idiot, so I'd have been the first to your side. It would have been oh so easy to wrap

my arms around you, say something mean to the French girl had she not left, and simply comforted you. I could have easily made you feel like the only person in the world that matters. And after that? Well after that you're mine Harry Potter," she smirked at him when she finished speaking. Harry couldn't help but be a little taken aback. And perhaps just a touch worried.

"That would have probably worked," Harry admitted.

"I know it would have worked, Harry. That's not the point. The point is that she didn't slap you, and I think she may actually not think you're just an immature kid overcome by her aura. It's disappointing, but I can live with it," Daphne said.

"I'm glad. You know, Daphne, I'm rather glad I asked you to the Yule Ball," he said.

"You mean you're rather glad that Titus conveniently got us together for the Yule Ball," she countered.

"If you want to put it that way, sure," he said. She just nodded in agreement. She didn't speak for a moment, choosing to let her gaze focus on the practice match instead. Harry turned the broom so he was watching as well. Nothing too unusual seemed to be happening.

"Promise me one thing, Harry?" Daphne asked.

"What's that?" Harry's eyes followed the quaffle as one of the chasers completely outmaneuvered Roger and scored easily past McLaggen.

"When things don't work out between you and the French girl you give me the first shot at winning your affections."

"I can agree to that. Although, I'm not sure how hard you'll have to try if that point ever comes," Harry said.

"That's good to know," Daphne responded. "So we're just friends, then?" she asked.

"I'd like to stay friends. I'm not sure we were ever really anything more than that," Harry said.

"We weren't, Harry. But we would have been," she paused for the briefest of moments. "You know, there are plenty of guys that would be crushed to simply be in the friend zone with me."

"I'm sure. But you've made it pretty clear that I can get out of it rather easily if need be," Harry responded.

"I suppose you're right," Daphne laughed. They chatted for a few more minutes. Harry focused more on watching the practice then. Roger was struggling, but there wasn't much he could say about that. Lilly and Alicia were playing incredibly well. As were Fred and George.

His eyes followed the Weasley twins for a moment. He watched Fred pass a bludger brilliantly to George, who had a much better vantage on the opposing chasers. George nailed it perfectly with his bat and it shot into the fray of chasers. Harry saw its path and winced. He knew what was coming.

The iron ball flew in very quickly, Alicia never had a chance. Harry would never forget the loud crack it made as it impacted on the back of her head. She slumped to the side and fell off of her broom. Harry heard screams from the crowd. He pushed his broom into a dive in her direction, momentarily forgetting just how weary he felt. He didn't think there was any chance that he would catch up.

But he did, just a couple of meters off of the ground he pushed his broom under her falling body. She impacted onto him and forced them both to the ground.

The blood was the first thing he noticed. The next was that, at the very least, Alicia was still breathing. He pushed her slumped body off of him so he could stand. He felt like he was in one piece. His broom appeared to have survived too. He had no idea where Alicia's flew off to. Frankly, he wasn't particularly concerned about that at the moment.

His teammates landed next to him, each looking shocked. George looked the worse of all of them. No one did anything more than look frightened.

"Someone levitate her. Keep her level, we have to get her to the hospital wing," Harry said. "And we have to do it as quickly as

possible!" Roger snapped out of the frightened daze first and did what Harry asked. The entire team followed suit. Harry lagged behind, feeling a bit dazed himself, but otherwise no worse for the wear.

He was the last member of the team to arrive at the hospital wing, moving slowly on his sore muscles. Madam Pomfrey had already stabilized Alicia. She was magically cleaning the blood out of the girl's hair as Harry entered.

"Don't tell me you managed to hurt yourself as well, Potter," the nurse said. Harry shook his head.

"No more than normal," he responded. Pomfrey laughed.

"If that's the case then I better check you out. Apparently nearly being stabbed by merpeople wasn't an exciting way to spend your day, you have to catch a falling chaser as well?" she scolded him, shaking her head. "Why is it always you, Potter?"

"I don't know. But in fairness, I didn't do much catching, she just sort of landed on me," he admitted.

"Yes, I gathered that. I should probably look you over, just in case," she said.

"Alright," Harry responded, figuring it was easier than arguing that he was okay. The nurse scanned him with her wand briefly.

"Well you're in one piece. Pretty beat up, but otherwise intact. Which is better than usual," the nurse said.

"How's Alicia?" he asked.

"She's stable. But that's the best I can say," the nurse looked around at the quidditch team. Harry realized she probably hadn't explained the diagnosis yet. "I'm assuming she has a concussion, and that her brain is swelling from the impact. It will likely affect her vision."

"Isn't there something you can do?" Roger asked.

"I've done what I can do, Davies. I closed the wound and made sure she's stable. She should recover, but it will take a great deal of time."

"But isn't there something more you can do? You can fix a broken bone in a second!" Roger looked rather desperate.

"Re-grow them pretty efficiently, too," Harry commented.

"Yes, but bones are easy, they simply need to be put back together. Brain injuries are considerably more serious," she explained.

"But there has to be something more that you can do," Roger begged.

"There are things I could do, Davies, but I'm not going to attempt them when she's in stable condition. The magic could have drastic effects on her brain. It's far too dangerous for me to attempt them now when I know her recovery will simply be a few months."

"A few months?" Roger groaned. "We have a match tomorrow!"

"And she will likely not even be awake for that. Unless you're willing to front the bill for an incredibly expensive, and incredibly dangerous magical brain operation. Since I know you're not, you should just trust me that letting her recover naturally from something like this is best. So you better just deal with it," Pomfrey said. Roger looked around.

"Well, you're starting then, Malcolm," he said. Preece just nodded. No one was in the mood to talk. Ginny looked slightly disappointed that Preece got the nod over her.

"Yes, deal with the team on your own time. For now get out of the hospital and let Alicia sleep. I've already notified her parents. They'll likely be here soon."

"Okay, let's go," Roger said, he spent another moment glancing at the injured, sleeping chaser before he left. The team followed him out.

"Harry," Pomfrey said as the others left. He paused and looked back at her. The nurse was rummaging through some potions. She found

the one she was looking for and gave it to him. "It's a numbing draught. Take it tonight and you shouldn't feel like death for the match tomorrow. It's perfectly legal, too. Only you would think to break someone's fall with your own body. Saved her life, you know."

"Thanks," was all Harry could think to say. He wouldn't ever admit that his plan had been to try to catch her, he'd just absorbed the blow instead. Still, he was glad Alicia would be okay, even if it took a couple of months. They'd just have to win tomorrow so she'd get a shot to play against Durmstrang in June.

Harry stepped out of the hospital wing in time to hear Roger tell the rest of the team to go to bed. The captain's words seemed weak. Harry, for one, thought the situation could be considered his fault. They probably shouldn't have even attempted the practice that night. But Roger was just trying to make sure they wouldn't be bounced from the tournament by Beauxbatons.

Harry started to walk back to the common room. He intended to chug the potion Madam Pomfrey gave him and sleep like a rock. His only real concern was waking up in time for the game. But he figured someone would come and get him if he didn't. He let out a large yawn and started to walk back toward the Gryffindor common room.

"Arry?" a familiar French accented voice said from behind him.

"Yes Fleur?" he said, turning to look at her. She looked mostly disheveled. Her hair was everywhere, she wore a robe wrapped tightly around her body, and slippers on her feet. Harry thought she looked like she'd just gotten out of bed. But at the very least, she looked relieved to see him. That had to count for something.

"Zey said zat one of ze 'Ogwarts chasers fell and was seriously injured," Fleur said. "Zey did not know who. Zey also said zat you saved her." Her accent sounded even worse than normal. Harry realized why she was concerned.

"It wasn't Lilly. It was Alicia," Harry said. "She got hit by a bludger in the back of the head. She's doing alright now, though."

"What 'appened?" Fleur asked. She looked visibly relieved.

"A bludger caught her in the back of the head," Harry repeated.

"No. After zat," she said.

"Oh. She kind of slumped on her broom," Harry said, demonstrating briefly with his body. "And then she fell off."

"And you caught her?"

"Well no. I got under her and then wound up slammed into the ground. My back actually really hurts," Harry admitted. "But Pomfrey, the nurse, thinks that I cushioned the fall enough that she'll be okay in a couple of months."

"You are very brave," Fleur said. Harry shook his head.

"No. Just very reckless," he replied.

"Do you make a 'abit of saving defenseless people?" she asked.

"Well it's not intentional," Harry said. "Usually it's a case of right place at right time. Or wrong place, if you prefer."

"You really are a strange one," she responded. Harry just shrugged. His conversations with other women coming back to him quickly. He decided to simply say what was on his mind.

"I'm sorry, Fleur," he said. She crossed her arms over her chest and stared at him.

"For what?" she asked.

"For not writing to you again, even though I said I would, and for just kissing you in public. I was operating on some mediocre advice, there," he said, looking straight at her. Fleur looked rather amused.

"Well, I did not write back to you either. It 'as been a very busy year, 'as it not?" she asked, tilting her head to the side.

"To say the least," Harry said.

"Yes. You do not need to apologize for zat. I am curious, what advice were you operating under?" She tilted her head to the side. Harry decided that it would probably be the best if he just told her.

"Well I talked to my godfather. He said that if I saw something that could be a chance I should take it. He said that it would take something like that to prevent you from thinking I was just a kid. I rather like you, Fleur. I have since we exchanged letters," he explained, figuring it would be best if he simply put it all out on the table.

"Interesting advice," Fleur said. She took a few steps closer to him.

"Tell me, 'Arry. Why did you save my sister in ze lake? Was it merely an attempt to get closer to me?" she asked.

"To be honest, Fleur, that thought never occurred to me," he admitted. He wouldn't say it, but he was disappointed she would even think that. "I saved her for the same reason I tried to save Alicia. I never thought about not saving her. Hell, I tried to save all of the hostages when I got there."

"Zat is what my friends said. You are very noble," she responded. "Of course, zat was only after zey finished making fun of me for being caught off guard as you kissed me."

"I did apologize for that," Harry pointed out. Still, the idea of Fleur's friends taunting her about it was fun to think about.

"As you should," Fleur said. "If it occurred in private I would not 'ave reacted ze same way," she admitted.

"What would you have done?" Harry asked. She slapped him. Rather hard. It stung quite a bit for a moment, but it didn't hurt nearly as much as his back or arm. Still, he rubbed it gently as he turned back to look at her.

"Zat. But now I must ask you something," she said.

"Well you have my attention," Harry replied, still rubbing his cheek a bit.

"When you asked me to ze ball. Did you really do it because you were worried I would not be able to find a date?"

"No," Harry laughed. "Was that the excuse I gave, I can't even remember. I asked you, Fleur Isabelle Delacour, because, as I said, I rather like you. I understand you think I'm an immature kid. I disagree. But that's that. Now, if you'll be kind enough to excuse me, Fleur, I'm exhausted." He turned to leave. Fleur followed him for the first two steps.

"Wait," she said. He turned back to face her, giving her the most attentive look he could muster at that point.

"I do not feel zat you are an immature kid," she said. "I realized around ze ball zat you are more zan you seem. I often think about your offer to ze ball. It certainly would 'ave been a better night."

"Probably," Harry admitted. He figured it would be bad form to admit that he'd had a great time at the ball regardless.

"Do not interrupt me," Fleur scolded. "Where was I? Oh yes. I am accustomed to people wanting to do zings for me. I assumed you followed Rodger because you simply wanted to save me. But I now realize you would 'ave probably done the same for any girl."

"Probably," Harry said again. He hadn't really thought about that before, but he certainly did have a record for saving people who were in otherwise precarious situations.

"You would 'ave. It is just who you are. Now. Zair is a rather large gap in our ages. We 'ave quite a few different zings that we must deal with in ze future. So I do not know if zis has any chance of working. But if you would like, 'Arry, I would love for you to accompany me to zat town ze students go to next weekend," she said. Harry noticed she appeared to choose her words carefully. She also blushed a little bit as she spoke. Fleur Delacour couldn't be nervous about asking him out, could she?

"Are you asking me out on a date, Miss Delacour?" Harry teased. She crossed her arms over her chest and gave him a cold stare.

"I would have assumed zat much was obvious," Fleur said.

"If I say yes can I brag that I'm dating Fleur Delacour?" he asked. She shook her head in annoyance.

"Only if you feel zat it will make that blonde witch you associate with jealous," Fleur said. Harry laughed a little bit.

"I think it would. Although what an ego boost it would be for her to think you're jealous of her," Harry said.

"I am jealous of her, 'Arry. Ze ball she had should 'ave been ze ball I had. Now will you go to dinner with me in ze town or not?" she said.

"Of course I will, Fleur," Harry responded.

"Good. Come by ze carriages at seven. Now, one more thing," she said, stepping closer to him.

"What's that?" he asked, tilting his head to one side. She didn't respond with words, but rather kissed him, very softly, right on the lips. She tasted wonderful. Harry's eyes closed as he kissed her back for a moment, until she pulled her lips just a few centimeters from his.

"Now we are even for surprise kisses," she whispered against his lips. Her breath was tantalizingly hot on his skin. All he wanted to do was kiss her back. "I would wish you luck tomorrow in ze quidditch match. But I feel I must pull for my school. Good night, 'Arry."

"Good night, Fleur," he said, attempting to move his lips back to hers, but she'd stepped back away and was moving back to the carriages. He was too tired to do anything but watch her go.

The somber mood of the locker room prevailed over everyone inside. Only Malcolm expressed any excitement for the game, but he was smart enough to not act too excited around the rest of the team. Harry was sure that Malcolm, like the rest of them, could feel the loss of Alicia's presence. There did just seem to be something missing.

Of course, Harry may have also attributed that to the pain potion he'd consumed the night before. Yes, it had worked, he certainly didn't feel any pain when he woke up. Of course, he was so groggy he barely remembered where he was and that he had a quidditch match to play. The icy air had woken him a bit, but the warm locker room was lulling him back to sleep.

He inspected his broom, simply to make sure that nothing was wrong with it after the fall. It appeared to be in perfect working order. Cho had volunteered to let him use hers for the match, just to be safe, but he thought his looked fine, so he'd simply had her look it over as well. Neither of them could find any fault. And really, if something was wrong he could always just call a time out and switch brooms.

After he finished with that he simply paced around the locker room. He intended to keep moving in order to keep himself awake. He took note of the team as he walked around. George looked pretty worn out. Harry doubted he slept much. They all knew the bludger wasn't his fault, but he was sure the twin felt terrible about it. And George knew that Alicia would want him to go out and play his heart out and get her a win.

Eventually, Roger led the team onto the pitch. The cold air helped rouse Harry a bit, as did the booming voice of Ludo Bagman.

"Ladies and Gentlemen!" Ludo yelled over the crowd. "Today we have the final qualifying match in the Quidditch tournament. Hogwarts and Beauxbatons will play to determine who gets the pivotal rematch against Durmstrang!"

"But this match needs no build up. You all know why we're here. So let's introduce the French team! We have team captain and keeper Bourdais, followed by Rousseau, Besson, Ardant, Morin, Garron, and Sinclair!" Harry watched the blue robed players fly out over the pitch as the Beauxbaton's contingent cheered loudly. The Hogwarts team mounted their brooms then and waited to be announced.

"Same as last time, just fly out when your name is called," Roger said.

"And now for the Hogwarts team! I present you with Fleet, Weasley, Weasley, Davies, Preece, Seson, and Potter!" Harry shot across the pitch, following closely behind Lilly. He rolled the opposite way as her when they reached the opposing hoops and looped back toward his own goal as Bagman continued.

"Preece is subbing in for the injured Alicia Spinnet. She took a dive off of her broom during a practice session yesterday. Word is she's out with a concussion, but in very good condition. We hope her the

best," Bagman finished for a moment. Harry flew around their defensive zone, enjoying how the rush of wind through his hair made him feel much more awake. He noticed some of his friends in the crowd as he flew by. Ron looked slightly dazed as he sat next to Hermione. Harry wondered if that Cheering Charm had finally worn off. He flew back toward the rest of the team after a moment.

Of course, it may have just been because Viktor Krum was seated on the other side of Hermione. Harry could only imagine what was going through Ron's head as he was about to watch a quidditch match with his idol.

"Alright, let's give this all we've got and win," Roger said. Clichéd words, but that didn't particularly bother Harry. They lined up and waited then. Harry floated above Fred, diagonally from where Sinclair lined herself up.

"The official is in position!" Bagman yelled. "And we're underway! Sesion wins the draw from Garron. She passes it to Preece. He relays it to Davies who takes the shot! It's batted away easily by Bourdais.

"Garron with the quaffle now. Passes it back to Morin. Returns it to Garron. Garron passes it across the pitch to Ardant. Sesion tries for the steal but an excellent bludger from Besson got into her path. Morin with the quaffle now. He shoots! Saved by Fleet. But there's no one there for the rebound! Garron into the center ring! What a save by Fleet! But no, Morin gets it back, Fleet is too far away to stop that one. 10-0 Beauxbatons.

"Sesion on the inbound to Davies. Davies moves down toward the center of the pitch. He tries to dump it blindly to avoid a bludger but Sesion isn't there! It's picked up by Garron who's all alone! Wait, Fred Weasley hits a bludger toward George, he goes for the shot on the speeding Garron! He misses badly! Garron scores 20-0 Beauxbatons! This Hogwarts line is looking a tad skitterish at the start of the game," Bagman announced.

Harry couldn't help but think he was right. Even from his vantage the chasers looked slow and slightly outmatched. Obviously the Beauxbatons team wasn't going to roll over and just let Hogwarts advance. But he could already tell this match was going to rely on his ability to catch the snitch. He cut between a group of

Beauxbatons chasers as he looked for the snitch. It created enough of a distraction to allow Roger to score the first goal of the game for Hogwarts.

Lilly followed it with a wonderful steal on the inbound. She relayed the quaffle quickly to Malcolm who tied the game up. But after that the tide quickly tilted back for Beauxbatons. Confusion on a play call from Malcolm led to another Beauxbatons break away. This time they scored easily.

Harry focused on finding the snitch as quickly as he could. When it suited his location on the field he helped out the chasers as much as he could, but Bourdais was playing exceptionally well in the hoops for Beauxbatons.

Thankfully, Fleet was also playing well, as the Beauxbatons team was getting an incredible amount of chances. Harry realized quickly that they weren't playing nearly the defense that they had against Durmstrang. Part of the problem, Harry noticed, was that George looked afraid to hit the bludger at anyone. His shots were all a few feet off, and the Beauxbatons team noticed it. They constantly attacked the area of the pitch he was defending.

Davies scored another goal for Hogwarts to tie it up, but it didn't matter. Beauxbatons had found their weakness and they exploited it. Before Harry even had time to react he noticed that the scoreboard near the announcers booth read Beauxbatons: 60 Hogwarts 30. He watched as Roger got nicked by a bludger on the arm, and Lilly dove out of the way to avoid another. It led to a turnover, though. Thankfully Fleet saved the shot.

Harry saw that the two chasers weren't ready to join back into the play, though, he darted over toward the official and called time out. He joined the other players near the bench in time to hear Roger speaking to George.

"Come on man. You have to be better out there. Get your head in the game. I know yesterday sucked. But it wasn't your fault. We need you!" the captain said to George. Unfortunately, George remained completely passive. He muttered things like 'I know' and 'alright' but Harry could tell he didn't want to be playing. Fred was trying to help his brother as well, but it didn't appear to be working.

Harry looked toward the bench. Only one other player didn't look shell-shocked like the rest of the team. In fact, he looked as focused

"Screw it, Roger. Titus, replace George for the rest of the game. George, you're still the starter, but that accident yesterday was hell. Sit this one out, we'll get you the rematch against Durmstrang." Harry spoke as firmly as he could. Titus stood and grabbed his broom and bat, looking toward the captain. Fred looked like he wanted to argue with him, but George just shook his head and sat next to Ginny on the bench. Roger nodded a bit to Harry. The official stopped by to tell them their time out was up. They kicked off as a group as play resumed.

"Well, we're back to the action now," Bagman announced. "It looks like Titus Button is replacing George Weasley at beater. That's obviously an attempt to bolster their defense. Interestingly, it looks like Potter made the call on the substitution. We'll see how that pays off for them.

"Looks like its starting off well. Button completely broke that play up with a well placed bludger. Hogwarts recovers it. Another well placed bludger, this time from Weasley, distracts Bourdais and Davies scores!"

Harry felt relieved the second the quaffle went through the hoops. He went back to focusing on the snitch and ignoring everything else. Sinclair seemed perfectly content to follow him by then. He paid little attention to her. If she made a rapid move he'd consider adjusting, but, unlike the previous match, this time he was confident he could out fly the opposing seeker.

The Hogwarts team started to mount a comeback. But Beauxbatons managed to stay a couple of goals ahead at nearly all times. Harry took a moment to see how Titus and Fred paired up as beaters. It was certainly a downgrade from Fred and George when they were both in top form, the teamwork just wasn't there. The two seemed to have decided to defend their own zone as best they could. They appeared to have little interaction with eachother. But the Beauxbatons team was getting fewer shots, so Harry decided it was a plus.

He kept flying. Searching for any sign of the magical golden ball that would seal the win. Finally, he saw it. Unfortunately, it was speeding

straight toward him. But he knew it would be out of his reach. He just hoped Sinclair wouldn't spot it. If she did, she'd have nearly the perfect line to it from following him. He banked away from it, hoping that the French seeker would take the bait. She did.

He pulled the broom as hard as he could the other way, knowing that Sinclair could probably maneuver easier than he in the tight space, but he wasn't going to put himself into a position where he needed to completely outmaneuver her. He placed himself where he thought the snitch was going, and forced the Lotus to full speed. Sure enough, he ran it down quickly, and had a large gap over Sinclair. It tried to cut away from him, but he anticipated the move and blocked it. Again it tried to cut back and resume, but Harry caught up with it and a simple swipe of his arm ended the match.

"Potter has the snitch!" Bagman yelled over the cheering fans. Harry circled up and around toward the center of the pitch where he met his teammates as Bagman continued to shout. "Hogwarts wins 240-120. Hogwarts will face Durmstrang in the final match of the year!" Harry was swarmed by his teammates. Everyone hugged him at least once.

When they finally let him breathe he looked through the crowd. His eyes found Fleur quickly. She was smiling at him despite her friends looking rather upset about the outcome. Next he saw Daphne, who sat next to Tracey and cheered enthusiastically. Finally, his eyes found Ron and Hermione, both of them cheered for him as well. But perhaps most telling was Viktor Krum, still sitting next to Hermione. He wasn't cheering or clapping, instead he was simply staring at Harry, with a smile on his face. Harry could tell he wasn't the only one excited for the rematch.

Author's Note: Not much to say about this chapter really. It sets up what everyone already knew would happen, with the final quidditch match. And, it only took them like six months, but Harry and Fleur are finally almost sort of a couple. More on that next chapter.

There's all sorts of things I want to say about reviewer comments on Daphne/Fleur, but I think I'll hold off on that until Fleur's character appears as more of a main force. It comes back to the reason why Lilly's role was significantly reduced from the original plan. I always knew that the other girl would be far more appealing for a large

chunk of the story. Hopefully, by the end, everyone likes Fleur just as much. But we'll see.

I did, as referenced in the last chapter, write the first chapter of a different fanfic. However, due to site errors, I can only upload new content via use of different hyperlinks, and cannot create new content. Otherwise, I'd have posted that already. Oh well. It'll be up when the site is fixed. Until then, I need to think of a better title for it.

Next chapter will probably be a tad shorter than the previous few installments. I have less planned for it than I usually do per chapter. But that's subject to change based on whatever I think of while writing.

Other than that, thanks for all the reviews on the last chapter, I appreciate them all. As always, the best way of contacting me with any questions or comments is through PM. I hope you enjoy the update and have a happy racing season, as both major series start on Sunday!

Chapter 15

Relationship

The week passed quickly. Harry found himself constantly surrounded by people. He would have sworn that every student at Hogwarts came up to congratulate him on the victory over Beauxbatons, and wish him luck in the rematch against Krum. Well, every student except for Draco Malfoy. But he was completely fine with that.

Of course, it helped that Viktor Krum often sat with Hermione at meals in the Great Hall. Ron gloated about it nearly constantly, which improved his mood greatly, and angered Draco to no end.

Harry enjoyed Krum's company as well. The older player didn't talk with him much, really he only talked to Hermione consistently, but Harry still enjoyed the stars company. Even if their conversations were often limited to quidditch and flying. At the very least Krum imparted some valuable advice to Harry.

Harry was running late for breakfast on one such morning. He ducked into the Great Hall to pick up some toast before heading toward the pitch. He noticed Ron attempting to converse with Krum. It was a tad strange how much Ron reminded him of Malfoy during those moments. Krum responded to most of the questions politely. But his replies were very contrite.

"Good morning, Harry," Hermione said as he grabbed the pieces of toast off of the Gryffindor table.

"Hey Hermione," he responded. "Oh and hey Viktor, Ron." He took a big bite of toast. Krum nodded at him, but Ron simply kept talking to the quidditch star.

"You have practice this afternoon, I assume?" she asked.

"Yes. Probably not going to go to Charms," he admitted, causing Hermione to scoff at him.

"What else is new there," she spat. "You'd think you'd be more interested in learning as to help out with the tournament."

"I'm doing alright for myself," Harry teased. It drew a laugh from Krum.

"If you insist," Hermione said. "Come on Ron, we'll be late if we linger any longer." She stood and left. Ron followed her, grabbing a couple of pieces of toast as he left. Harry found himself alone at the table with Viktor Krum. Most of the students were leaving the hall to head to whichever class they had that morning. Harry had simply planned on going for a run and then flying around for a bit, or maybe visiting Hagrid. Of course, Hagrid did have a class that morning, and if he got too close he'd wind up having to help care for one of those exploding scorpion things that scared him half to death. So a mix of that and Krum's bored expression made Harry wonder just what the older boy was doing that day.

"I was going to just screw around on my broom before practice," Harry said. Krum looked at him appraisingly. "Want to join me?"

"Well," Krum said. Then he simply shrugged. "Sure. I have nothing better to do."

"Cool," Harry responded as he finished his last piece of toast. They both walked quietly down to the pitch. Harry ducked into the Hogwarts locker room to change into a practice uniform and grab his broom. Krum told him he'd have to go back to the ship to change and grab his own broom.

Harry was first back to the pitch. He mounted the broom and simply started to leisurely fly around the pitch, circling through each of the hoops as he did. He decided to see just how quickly he could weave through the three hoops on one side of the pitch, shoot out toward the other hoops and weave through those three as well.

It started off pretty well. He got through the first three hoops easily. And he came out on a perfect line toward the opposing hoops. He cut in perfectly and banked hard to the right coming through the middle hoop. But he misjudged the quick turn and clipped his broom on the hoop, spinning wildly toward the center of the pitch. He recovered quickly only to hear Krum's laughing.

"Nice recovery," the Bulgarian said, floating up next to him. "But you misjudged the distance there."

"I noticed," Harry replied grumpily, glad he just embarrassed himself thoroughly in front of the older player.

"It was actually a nice move," Krum said. He was laying down on his broom with supreme balance. "Could use it to really confuse a keeper. Just be careful not to fly into the keeper. Penalty."

"You're giving me advice?" Harry asked, sounding a little bit surprised. He certainly hadn't expected that.

"Yes," Krum responded simply. He slid back into a normal position on the broom and spun to face Harry.

"Not worried I'll beat you?" Harry asked.

"No." Krum laughed.

"Ouch," Harry responded. He wasn't sure what to think. He hated Krum for a moment. He thought the older player was a complete and utter cock. But that just made him want to beat him more. And through all his comments, Krum was still smirking. Could he know that such comments would push Harry even harder in the final match. After a moment, Harry spoke again. "You know, I'm ahead of you in the other tournament."

"With one event to go. It will be a fantastic comeback for Krum," Viktor said.

"You're very confident," Harry said dryly.

"Become a professional seeker. You will be too. You have to think you are going to win, Harry, or you will not win," Viktor responded.

"I guess that's good advice," Harry said. Still, he had a very hard time thinking he could ever be quite as confident as Viktor Krum.

"It is. You will use it. But now I will start training you," Krum said. "Now you must keep up." Krum sped off toward the castle.

It took Harry a moment to react, but he chased after the older seeker. Krum flew dangerously close to the castle. He ducked between two of the towers before pulling off a quick hairpin around another. Harry

missed that badly, but Krum slowed down to let him regain the ground.

At least until he decided to shoot off toward Hagrid's hut. Krum smoked him in a straight line, and he knew it. Harry kept up as best as he could until Krum curved over the forest. The older seeker patched ahead with a series of quick S-turns. Harry kept up with him through that. He even gained some ground.

But when he got close enough that he thought he could probably reach out and grab the end of Krum's broom, the Bulgarian moved into a steep climb. Harry pressed himself as low to the broom as he possibly could and followed. He was pleasantly surprised that he started to gain ground.

At least until Krum complicated the climb with a series of complicated twists and turns and direction changes. Harry hadn't ever tried to maneuver that much in a climb and he wasn't particularly confident with following the Bulgarian. But Harry did the best he could, and when Krum finally stabilized out of the climb, was considerably closer than he would have expected. Still, the more experienced seeker didn't stay level for long.

Instead, Viktor pressed himself into a rather leisurely feint, at least as far as feints went. Harry followed with ease. Even the corkscrewing move that Krum added wasn't particularly difficult for him to follow. Of course, Harry wondered when Krum was going to pull out of the feint, as the forest was getting closer very quickly.

But Krum didn't pull up. Instead he dove right through the trees and righted himself around ground level. But he didn't stop. He just kept flying through the forest. In fact, he didn't even slow down. It would have been breathtaking to watch, but he was rather focused on not crashing head-first into a tree. Krum kept that up for a few hundred meters before he lifted off of the ground level.

Harry thought he was going to climb out of the forest, but instead he just started to weave even closer to the trees. Harry kept up the best he could. But that wasn't saying much as the trees sped by. He couldn't help but think that crashing into a tree at full speed on a broom would be a pathetic way to die. But, at the very least, it would make for an interesting obituary.

Thankfully, Krum found the end of the forest. Harry held his breath until he was clear of the final trees. The two seekers shot out of the forest, past an alarmed looking Bartimus Crouch, and sped off toward the lake. Wait, Harry thought. Hadn't Crouch missed the last task. He vaguely remembered not seeing him at the judges table for the competition. Of course, before the task he was too busy worrying if the Gillyweed would work. And after, well after he was too busy marveling at just how soft Fleur's lips were. Still, he vaguely recalled something about Crouch being sick. He didn't care, though. He needed to catch up with Viktor.

Krum was simply flying in a large, fast banked circle around the lake. Harry followed as quickly as he could. Krum let off just a bit to allow Harry some time to catch up. Of course, as soon as Harry got close again, Krum continued with the aerial acrobatics.

This time the Bulgarian seeker flew back toward the castle. Again, he maneuvered around the towers, flying even closer to the stone structures this time. Harry found it was already a tad easier to keep up than it had been when they started.

Krum appeared to notice this too, as he started to maneuver more through the infrastructure of the school. He dived toward one of the courtyards and weaved expertly through both people and arches. Harry followed, causing most people to shriek and flee. Quite a few swore at him. But Harry didn't have time to stick around and apologize because Krum climbed back up into the air.

Harry kept following, willing his broom to go faster with each passing moment. Krum flew straight toward the Owlery. He was moving so quickly that Harry was convinced he was going to fly straight into it. In a way, he did. But Viktor also came out on the other side surrounded by a swarm of frightened owls. Harry had little choice but to follow him, hoping desperately that he didn't collide with one of the birds. He didn't. But Hedwig did try to keep up with him for a moment, hooting angrily at the early-morning distraction from her nap. Fortunately, the bird gave up and flew back to the roost after only a few moments.

Krum banked away from the castle and flew back over toward the pitch. Harry could tell what he was going to attempt long before he even tried it. The Bulgarian sped off toward the far hoops as quickly as he could. He flew through it and weaved through the other two

hoops before flying off down the pitch. Harry made up quite a bit of time at the sharp corners, but Krum pulled away again as they raced toward the other set of hoops.

Krum arrived first and weaved expertly through the first two rings but he misjudged the third. Harry watched as Viktor attempted to correct himself, only to slam against the side of the ring and spin off much like Harry had on his first attempt.

"I win," Harry said, not even bothering to suppress a laugh as he came flawlessly out of the third ring. The laugh didn't last long, though, as he realized then just how winded he was. He had to admit that was quite a feat, he hadn't felt this drained from simple flying since the first couple of practices the team had for the tournament. Krum pulled the broom out of the spin and took a moment to right himself before speaking.

"Yes, you do," Krum admitted, looking a tad more like his surly self than Harry had seen when he was around Hermione.

"You know, people say I fly like I'm insane. But they've obviously not watched you carefully enough," Harry admitted and Viktor perked up after that.

"Yes. Quidditch flying is fun. But you do not get the chance to fly like that often. And having it be a race makes it even more fun," Viktor said. Harry couldn't help but agree.

"Yea, that was a blast. I thought you were trying to kill me in the forest," Harry said.

"I was," Krum responded. "I am amazed you kept up through that. I thought for sure I'd be carrying you to the hospital."

"Me too," Harry said. "Now I have to ask. Before you flew off like a maniac, you said you were going to train me? Why would you want to train me, I'm going to beat you." Harry tried to sound as confident as he could. Regardless, it drew a smile from Krum.

"I will win," Krum stated.

"You wish," Harry interrupted. Krum rolled his eyes but continued.

"I will win. But I want it to be the best possible match. You have talent, but you are raw. When I was your age I practiced eight to ten hours a day. Hermione said you only really started practicing this year?"

"Well, we had some pretty intense practices last year, too. But yea, this year has been by far my most quidditch heavy year," Harry admitted.

"Then you have a lot of catching up to do," Viktor said.

"I guess I do," Harry responded, finally really catching his breath.

"Good, we will work on that then. Must put on a good show in the last match," Krum said.

"Great," Harry groaned. "More practices like that? You're going to kill me."

"No. I have watched your practices. Your captain is good with chasers and beaters, but does not know what to do with seekers," Krum said. Harry was going to argue, because he felt Roger had he and Cho prepared well enough. But he realized how fruitless arguing with the man who's largely considered the best seeker in the world could be.

"Well," Harry said. "I'd be stupid to refuse. When do we start?"

"We already did," Krum said. "We will practice three times a week like this until shortly before the match."

"Well that should be fun," Harry said.

"Yes. I look forward to it. Now, did you see the judge outside of the forest?" Krum asked.

"Yea. It looked like Crouch. He's with our ministry. I thought he was ill," Harry said.

"He was not at the last event," Krum said. "I am also not sure if he was at the Ball."

"Well, let's go check it out," Harry said, flying off toward the forest where he had seen Crouch. There wasn't any sign of him.

"Strange," Krum said, hovering close to the ground. "There does not appear to be any sign of him."

"Yea. Weird. Oh well. I have to get to practice soon," Harry said and started to fly back. Krum followed him without a word. But Harry did notice the older seeker looked over his shoulder at the forest a few times as they flew. Harry gazed back over the grounds and noticed that Professor Moody was walking toward Hagrid's hut. Harry banked toward the professor.

"Professor Moody," he shouted as he flew by. The older man nearly jumped out of his fake leg.

"Potter," he said hoarsely.

"Heading to Hagrid's?" Harry asked in a rather pathetic attempt to create a conversation.

"Yes, Potter. He wanted me to make sure some of his creatures are healthy," Moody replied. "Apparently he has plans for them later."

"That's a scary thought," Harry admitted. "But, I was wondering, sir, what do you know about Mr. Crouch?"

"Crouch?" Moody looked rather surprised to be asked. "Not a whole lot. Why do you ask?"

"Well, Krum and I thought we saw him near the forest. But we were flying pretty hard and didn't get a particularly good look."

"I seriously doubt you saw him, Potter. It's all over the papers, he's been sick for months. He left your friend's brother in charge." Moody said gruffly.

"Well that would seem unlikely then. We must have been mistaken. Have a good day, sir," Harry said, attempting to sound as cordial as he could.

"You too, Potter. And do try to come to class for once. Your O.W.L year is going to be unpleasant if you need to cover both fourth and fifth year," the professor advised.

"I'll try," Harry said, before flying off with Krum.

"That was strange," Krum commented, flying up next to Harry.

"A little bit. But it does make sense," Harry said.

"If you think so. I know who I saw," Krum responded.

"I thought it was him too. But it just must not have been," Harry argued. Krum just shrugged his shoulders.

"No. It was him," Krum said. Harry thought it was too. But he didn't see much of a point in pressing it. He'd been flying as fast as he could past the figure, and certainly hadn't even bothered to look back. And there hadn't been any sign of him when they flew back.

"Hermione did mention you were stubborn," Harry commented.

"Funny, she says the same thing about you," Krum said. "And she agrees with your professor. You must go to class more often." As the conversation shifted, neither of them noticed that Professor Moody started to walk toward the forest, rather than toward Hagrid's hut.

"I probably should. I do go to most of them. Well, probably about three fourths of them. But it's so easy to not when there's no repercussions," Harry said. "Do you think I should go more?"

"That is up to you," Krum responded. "I do think you will be easier to beat in June if you go to class more now."

"So that's a yes?" Harry teased.

"It is very close to one, yes," Krum responded. The older seeker paused for a moment. "Can I ask you a question about Hermione?"

"If you want. But I'll warn you. I'm atrocious with all manners concerning girls," Harry answered. He found it a little hard to believe that Krum would possibly need any form of advice from him.

"You cannot be that bad. You have the French champion and that pretty blonde," Krum commented.

"Well, the pretty blonde sort of fell into my lap. And I've been trying to get Fleur to notice me since they arrived," Harry countered.

"You should see if the blonde is interested in the French girl," Krum said. Harry looked at him for a moment. He'd be lying if he said he hadn't thought about it. But he knew that would never, ever, be more than a fantasy.

"That really just sounds overly complicated," Harry said. Krum just tilted his head back and laughed. Harry crossed his arms and let the older seeker laugh for a few moments before speaking again. "Are you quite done? You had a question about my best friend, I believe."

"Oh yes," Krum responded. "I do not think she likes me that much." Harry couldn't help but think that wasn't the question. Really, it wasn't even a question.

"So you wanted to ask me what?" Harry asked.

"Why is this?" Krum asked. "What can I do to make it better?"

"I have no idea. Hermione is shy and she doesn't have a lot of close friends. You're the first boy who's really shown a direct interest in her, at least that I'm aware of. I'd suggest taking it slow," Harry said. "I mean, she told me you invited her to Bulgaria. She'd love to go, but she doesn't think her parents would let her, and she really doesn't want to become a quidditch groupie."

"I see," Krum responded. "I guess I am too accustomed to how people act around me. Tell me, does she fancy Ron?" Harry could sense just a tinge of jealousy from Krum. He couldn't help but chuckle a bit at that.

"I don't think so. Ron is, for lack of a better word, clueless about most things though." Harry admitted.

"Yes. He is also a bit trying," Viktor said, clearly not afraid if he offended Harry with the comment about his best friend. But Harry knew that the Bulgarian was right. "But when he sulked for the entire

ball staring at her. Well, I thought the only reason she agreed to go with me was to make him mad."

"Hermione wouldn't do something like that. If she hadn't been interested in you, she wouldn't have gone to the ball with you," Harry said.

"I have noticed she is very independent and strong-willed," Krum commented.

"Yes, she is. And she's an excellent friend. Just take things slowly with her if you're really interested," Harry said.

"Thank you, Harry," Krum responded. "I appreciate the help."

"As do I, Viktor. The last match should be fun. I'm looking forward to it."

"Me too," Krum responded. "Now go and practice more so you stand a chance."

By the time the next weekend rolled around Harry was just as sore as he had been since the practices had first started. The workouts with Krum were definitely tiring, although they mostly consisted of chasing after the Bulgarian. Harry figured out quickly that Krum was acting as a snitch during these sessions. Krum made him fly in directions and patterns that Harry hadn't even imagined before.

To make it worse, every time he felt like he was getting closer to the other seeker, Krum flew faster and more skillfully. Still, in just a week he could already see how he was improving. And he wasn't the only one that could tell the difference, either.

"You're really getting good. It's going to be fun to watch you thrash Malfoy next year," Daphne said as she and Harry wandered around the castle, in the general direction that they both assumed would lead to the Great Hall, if the staircases cooperated.

"Don't let your housemates hear you say that," Harry responded. Daphne had found him after Tracey and Titus left for Hogsmeade. He wasn't sure how she'd found him, but she had. He was heading outside to meet Fleur for his own date, but he couldn't think of how he could ditch her without being overly rude.

"I expect some of them will be secretly rooting for you to embarrass Draco on the broom. They'll probably just hope that without Wood we can score enough so that catching the snitch isn't a guaranteed win," she laughed.

"Well, I'll make sure to embarrass him thoroughly just for you," Harry responded dryly. "Wouldn't want to let my Slytherin following down."

"Cute, Harry. Whatever excuse you could have for simply coming out and winning, right?" She teased.

"Well I'm certainly not going to lose to Draco Malfoy," Harry commented.

"Well, very few duelists did last time. I notice you weren't in attendance," Daphne said. Harry had missed the second round of dueling.

"Yea, Roger wanted to hold a practice then. Figured it would be away from spying eyes of Durmstrang," Harry commented, quoting his captain.

"Well you didn't miss much. Cedric and Adrian aren't bad. But Draco hasn't improved at all. It was almost painful to watch. We're last there now, Durmstrang and Beauxbatons are tied for the lead," she explained. Harry already knew that, but he didn't see a point in commenting about it.

"It's a shame that they have to fight with a handicap," Harry commented.

"Yes it is. At the very least it's better than the academic competition," Daphne said. Harry also hadn't gone to that, either. He didn't even know who was on the team

"How's that?" Harry asked.

"It's just a bunch of prissy Ravenclaws answering questions as arrogantly as possible. Then three prissy French students to the same thing, followed by three prissy Durmstrang students. I'm surprised Granger isn't on the team," Daphne commented.

"She volunteered," Harry said, recalling the conversation. "But McGonagall staunchly refused to let someone on the team who wasn't in their seventh year. She has let Hermione attend some of the study sessions, though," Harry explained. Hermione had been very annoyed at McGonagall for that, but it had simply caused her to spend even more time studying, if such a thing were even possible.

"Well. It's dull either way. Would be better if Crabbe, Goyle, and Longbottom were on the team," Daphne said. "Watching the three of them bumble around and attempt to intelligently answer questions would certainly be amusing,"

"Hey now," Harry scolded. "Neville isn't dumb. And he's a great bloke that's brilliant at Herbology." Harry couldn't help but defend his friend. Daphne just shrugged her shoulders.

"If you insist. He's abysmal in potions and useless in defense. I've heard he's just as useless as everyone in creatures, but I haven't witnessed that," Daphne said. Harry could tell he wasn't going to change her mind. He even resisted the urge to comment that Neville hadn't been the only student dumb enough to get mauled by a hippogriff in the previous year. And frankly, Neville hadn't flourished in any of the subjects, so accurately coming to his defense in anything other than Herbology was difficult. Although he was improving with Moody.

"You aren't in creatures or Divination, are you?" Harry asked, although he already knew the answer to that question.

"Observant of you," Daphne responded dryly.

"Well what are your electives?" Harry asked.

"Ancient Runes and Muggle Studies," she responded quickly.

"Muggle Studies?" Harry asked. He certainly hadn't expected that from a pureblood, and knowing Daphne she was probably trying to pull a fast one on him.

"Muggle Studies," Daphne affirmed.

"I didn't think any Slytherins took that," Harry stated.

"I'm the only one in our year,"

"Well, why are you taking that?"

"I'm interested in history and law," Daphne said. "It's the closest subject to that that's offered."

"Muggle Studies does history?"

"Yes. A lot of what the Muggles think happened compared to what we actually did. It's interesting, really," Daphne explained. "The bits on culture are a tad boring. But I enjoy it."

"I bet that makes you a bit of an outcast in Slytherin," Harry said.

"Not really," Daphne replied. "Some of the older students have taken the class as well. Everyone just assumes I'm in it because it's easy. Same reason most people take creatures."

"I guess that makes sense," Harry said. He jumped over one of the fake steps on the staircase and landed in near the entrance to the castle. Daphne took a much more careful route, daintily stepping over the fake step and moving next to him. He had to admit, it did sound like a better option than Divination.

"The Entrance Hall?" she asked before batting her eyelashes adorably at him. "Are you taking me to Hogsmeade, Harry? That's very nice of you, but how do you know I don't have plans?"

"Actually, I have a date with Fleur," he responded. Her face fell quite a bit.

"Oh? The Frenchie wasn't mad at you? That's a shame."

"She was mad enough to slap me. But she then asked me to go to town with her today," Harry explained.

"Damn. Maybe she won't show up and I'll have to substitute for her," Daphne teased. "I have to see you attempting to flirt with her, too." Harry realized that he wasn't going to get rid of her easily. He figured he'd be better off letting her tag along for now.

"I doubt she won't show up," Harry said.

"Yes, but I'll take my chances," Daphne commented. They walked in silence for the next couple of minutes. When they left the castle Harry led Daphne toward the Beauxbatons' carriage. Fleur was standing outside of it. She had a Beauxbatons cloak wrapped around her shoulders, but she wasn't wearing her school uniform. Instead she wore a pretty yet simple dress. It looked lighter than anything Harry would have considered appropriate for the season, but Fleur didn't appear to be cold. It occurred to him that the outfit was probably enchanted to prevent that.

Regardless, Harry was glad he'd decided to wear Muggle clothing as well. Most students did on weekends, but he wasn't sure what Fleur would have worn. He'd picked out some of the things that fit him the best when he'd gone shopping with Hermione.

"Told you," Harry said as they walked toward the carriage. He noticed Fleur crossed her arms and looked slightly annoyed.

"She's even all dolled up for you," Daphne said. Harry had no idea what she meant, but as he got closer he noticed that she was either cold, or wearing some blush. Her lips also looked a little bit redder than normal.

"What?" Harry asked, Daphne didn't respond.

"Good afternoon, 'Arry," Fleur said as they approached. "Who is your friend?"

"Oh, uhm. This is Daphne. Daphne, this is Fleur," Harry said, realizing just how awkward this situation was about to get. Thankfully, though, Daphne saved him.

"A pleasure," she said, giving Fleur a nod of her head. "Harry talks about you quite often." Harry wasn't sure if that was true or not. He couldn't really remember talking about Fleur with Daphne when she hadn't brought it up.

"Oui, et vous," Fleur responded. Harry could sense that she wanted to say more, but she didn't. Perhaps that's why she switched to French for the moment.

"Well I'll leave you two then," Daphne said with a faux smile. "Enjoy your date, Harry," she added, putting the emphasis on the first letter of his name. She gave Harry a large, full hug then, pressing herself as closely to him as she could. She followed that with a lingering kiss on the cheek, dangerously close to the corner of his mouth. After that she let him go and started to walk off toward the castle. Fleur made sure she was out of earshot before speaking.

"Why did you 'ave 'er come with you?" she asked. Her voice was rather cold.

"I didn't," he responded. "I couldn't think of a way to get her to go away without being rude."

"You are a strange one, 'Arry," she said, eyeing him up.

"You've said that," he responded. He was getting a tad sick of hearing it. So he changed the subject. "You look very nice today. I like what you've done with your hair." She had it up in a bun. Harry actually thought it looked better down, but she didn't need to know that.

"Thank you," Fleur said, still sounding a tad frosty. "You do as well. It is nice to see you in something zat fits so well zat isn't a quidditch uniform."

"Well, shall we?" Harry asked, gesturing to the carriages that transported students to the town. He was amazed at how uncomfortable the brief interaction with Daphne had made the entire situation. Fleur just nodded and moved toward them.

The first few minutes of the date remained awkward and silent. Harry sat close to her in the carriage, but she didn't say anything, or even really look at him. After a few minutes he gave up and spoke.

"I'm sorry, Fleur. She did just sort of follow me. I didn't know she'd do that in front of you," he said, trying his best to not sound annoyed at how he perceived Fleur acted. To his surprised, she chuckled lightly.

"You do not need to apologize, 'Arry. I am not irritated with you. Daphne, you said zat was her name?" She asked. Harry nodded a little bit and she continued. "She is very cunning, zat one."

"Yea, she is," Harry said, remembering the conversation he had with her shortly before Alicia was injured. Of course, that didn't help him figure out what exactly she was trying to accomplish. "But what was she trying to do?"

"She was trying to irritate me, like pointing out zat I cannot properly say your name," Fleur said simply. "And it was working. I rarely find myself jealous of another girl. It took me a moment to decide 'ow to react."

"What?" Harry asked. "Oh, and I like how you say my name."

"That's kind of you. But, she wanted me to do something stupid. Something zat would reflect poorly on me in your eyes. So she could point out just 'ow terrible I am when you recount ze evening for her," Fleur explained.

"That's not very nice of her," Harry said.

"No. But I 'ave to admire it. She certainly knows just what she wants and she is willing to try to attain it," Fleur said. She did sound like she admired the girl, too.

"Well that was rather sneaky of her," Harry said. "I'm sorry that she did that."

"Again, 'Arry. It is not something you need to be apologizing for," Fleur said. "Now, entertain me by telling me what you 'ave planned for our trip to 'Ogsmeade."

"I erm," Harry mumbled. "I hadn't really planned anything." He could feel the blood rushing to his cheeks. Way to blow your first date, Harry, he thought. He hadn't known that he was supposed to be the one who planned what they were going to do. He wasn't even sure if Fleur had been to Hogsmeade before.

"You're cute when you are flustered, 'Arry," she said. "You are in luck, though. Unlike many of my schoolmates. I 'ave not done anything in 'Ogsmeade past sit in the inn with some friends. So I am sure I will enjoy whatever we decide to do."

"Well that's good," Harry said. "I know you said you wanted to do dinner, too. But I don't really know any restaurants in Hogsmeade. Well, except for The Three Broomsticks."

"Good," Fleur said. "We shall find one then. It will make ze experience all ze more fun."

"If you insist," Harry said.

"Which I do. Trust me. We will duck into some little restaurant zat most students do not even know exists, and we will share a nice meal over ze candlelight."

"Sounds like you really didn't need me to come up with a plan," Harry laughed.

"Of course I didn't need you to," Fleur said. "But I only 'ave dinner planned out. You will need to think of what we shall do before then."

"Well, that shouldn't be too hard. It's only a couple of hours," Harry responded. Fleur nodded her agreement about the same time that the carriage stopped moving. Harry quickly stepped out of his side then turned to help Fleur get out. She didn't need the help, but looked appreciative.

"Thank you," she said as she stepped back onto the ground. "Where shall we start?"

"Well, you said you haven't been here before? How about we take a walk up the street and stop at anything that catches your fancy?"

"That sounds fine for now," Fleur said. They started to simply do that. Harry pointed out all of the shops as they walked past. Fleur listened as he talked. It wasn't long past Honeydukes that he realized he was freely talking about the secret passage in the basement and the secrets of the Marauder's map.

"So wait," Fleur said after they ducked into the sweet shop. "You're telling me zat you 'ave a map which shows everyone in ze castle as well as ze secret passages in ze school?"

"Yes. It was made by my father's friends when they were at school. They liked to go out and explore," Harry admitted. "It can be a pain

to read at times, though. Especially if many of the students are congregating in one area. The dots become hard to read."

"Zat is unbelievable, 'Arry," she said. "If you were any other person I would think you were making it up to try to impress me."

"If you like we can sneak into the basement and I can show you the passage," Harry said.

"I'd prefer you bought me this chocolate bar," she said, holding up the candy. "And zen 'elp me eat it while we resume our walk."

"I can do that," Harry laughed. He took the candy bar from her and purchased it. They walked back to the street then and continued to lazily walk around. Fleur took the candy bar back and opened it as they walked. She offered him a piece as he kept talking. Unfortunately, their leisurely walk was interrupted.

"Harry!" Rita Skeeter's fake, silky voice cut through the air. "And the French champion? My my, this article will sell even better than the last one about the Slytherin girl. Whatever are you two up to now?"

"Walking through Hogsmeade," Harry said.

"How entertaining. Are you on a date?"

"No comment," Fleur said quickly.

"That sounds awfully like a yes" Rita said.

"I thought it sounded more like a 'go away' to be perfectly honest," Harry responded. They attempted to walk away from Rita, but she followed them.

"Not so fast now. You know I can't pass up a scoop like this. You have to give me an interview," she gave them both her faux smile.

"We don't 'ave to do anything with you," Fleur said. "You're the reporter who insinuated I charmed my way into the tournament. I 'ave no wish to ever speak with you."

"Well I have to write something," Rita attempted to argue. "My readers will be very interested to know how you charmed young

Harry here. They'll be furious." Harry felt that sounded a bit too much like a threat.

"I'm not charmed, Rita. And if you have to write something, try actually writing a fact for once," Harry spat. "Now if you wouldn't mind. We have better things to do right now." The pair walked away from the reporter. Thankfully, Rita didn't follow, she merely yelled after them.

"You'll regret that, Harry. I haven't forgotten what you said about my last article. I'll make you pay."

"What did you say about her last article?" Fleur asked.

"I've no idea. I haven't even read anything she's done," Harry said. "Last I heard she was writing an article about my time at the Yule Ball. Did she really say you charmed your way into the tournament?"

"Yes. She wrote an article shortly after ze selection and in it she implied zat ze only reason I was ze Beauxbatons champion was because I used my aura against ze goblet," Fleur said.

"Could you even do that?" Harry asked.

"No," Fleur said. "It is an inanimate object. I can only charm living things."

"I wouldn't have thought so. She'll do anything for a story," Harry said.

"Yes, she will. But we should not let zat ruin our evening. You were telling me ze most interesting stories of your father and 'is friends. Please continue," she said, breaking off another piece of chocolate and offering it to Harry. He thanked her and continued the story. He felt that he needed to explain the origins of the map so started with how the marauders wondered where Lupin disappeared to, and how they eventually figured out just what was wrong with their friend. By the time he finished telling that story they were walking on the path that led back to the Shrieking Shack.

"So your father's former friend, and your former defense professor was a werewolf? And your father became an animagus with 'is

friends to spend more time with 'im?" she asked, clarifying the points of the story.

"Yea, that about covers it," he replied.

"They were very good friends," she responded.

"Yes, they were. You see that house up there?" Harry asked, pointing to it.

"Yes," Fleur responded.

"That's the Shrieking Shack," Harry said.

"Oh?" Fleur interrupted. "Is it named zat because 'Ogwarts students sneak off to it to engage in nefarious activities?" She smirked at him.

"No," Harry couldn't help but blush. "It was built the year Lupin came to school. The people in the town thought it was haunted because of the noises coming from it when he transformed," Harry explained. "It's also where I learned the truth about my godfather. But that's a story for another time." Harry would have liked to tell her the truth about Sirius. But he was sure their fledgling relationship wasn't ready for that. And for all he knew Rita was probably following them, eavesdropping onto their conversation.

"What? You can't just end on zat cliffhanger!" Fleur argued.

"Sorry, but I'm hungry, and it really is a story that will be better at another date," Harry said. He'd have liked to take her up to Sirius and introduce them. But he wasn't sure how she'd react to the suspected felon. And he knew it would be better if fewer people knew about Sirius.

"Did you decide on a place to eat?" Fleur asked.

"I'm the one that has to pick now?" Harry responded jokingly. "I thought that little restaurant that appeared to be the first floor of a house looked nice."

"Me too," Fleur responded.

"Cool. Let's go check it out then," Harry said. He turned around on the path and started to walk back the way they came. Fleur followed him. They didn't talk on the short walk back to the restaurant. But the silence was no longer completely uncomfortable.

Harry wasn't sure when it happened, either. He couldn't pick out when the atmosphere of the date changed. But he knew he was enjoying himself, and he if he could judge by the way Fleur looked at him when he was talking, she was also enjoying herself.

There was one more thing he didn't notice until they arrived at the restaurant as well. Again, he wasn't sure when it happened, or how long it had lasted. But Fleur's hand was in his when they arrived at the restaurant.

The rest of the date continued in the same fashion. They were one of the only couples in the small restaurant located a few streets off of the main drag of town. Harry also assumed they were the only students in the restaurant, as all the other patrons seemed older.

The hostess seemed rather surprised to have students in the restaurant as well. But she recognized them immediately and after only a few moments of gushing, she sat them at a secluded table in the corner.

Harry and Fleur conversed about the tournament for a few minutes, each guessing at what the final task could be. Harry didn't think that anything they came up with sounded like a possible event, but he certainly hadn't had dragons or the lake on his list of tasks.

Eventually the conversation shifted to each other. Harry asked about her sister. Apparently Gabrielle was madly in love with him after she learned of the lake task. Fleur talked adoringly of her sibling and her parents. She shared funny family stories. She even let him in on the scolding her mother had given her for not writing that she was dating Harry Potter after he kissed her following the task.

They ordered their food amidst one of the stories. Harry ordered the fish and chips and a butterbeer, Fleur ordered one of the daily specials, a coq au vin. She ate diplomatically when it came. Harry thought it smelled delicious, but he could tell Fleur thought

something was missing from the dish. Still, she didn't mention it and ate nearly all of it.

During the meal the conversation shifted to him. She asked questions about his first few years at school, and he answered them as honestly as he could. She held his hand in the middle of the table after they'd finished their meal. All the while he explained Nicholas Flamel's stone, Tom Riddle's diary, and even a little bit of time-turner mishap. Of course, he still didn't give her the name of his godfather. But she didn't pester him on that point. When he was finally done explaining she stared at him with wide eyes, shaking her head.

"You are remarkable," she admitted. "You were not kidding. You do like to run off and save people. Don't you?"

"Well, I don't usually think about it," he responded. "I usually just act."

"Zat is a gift, 'Arry. Many people seem to be lucky that you use it," she said, squeezing his hand just a little bit. "I now do not doubt zat you didn't save my sister for me. You saved my sister because you could not fathom leaving her. You are special."

"Your sister wasn't in any danger," Harry said as he blushed and looked away.

"Zat is not ze point," she responded. "I would not 'ave saved Ron Weasley 'ad I arrived first. And ze other champions proved zey would not as well. Yet you did. And you would do it again."

"Well, I don't know about that. If I could go back I may leave them," Harry said.

"You would not," Fleur commented. Her voice incredibly soft. "Zat is not who you are."

"Maybe," Harry said. "But for now let's talk about something more fun. I feel like I've just been narrating my life. Would you like to get some dessert?"

"Well it 'as been interesting," Fleur argued. "But we should probably catch a carriage unless we want to walk back to ze school. You

know, ze Beauxbatons elves make excellent desserts. Come back to ze carriage with me and we will partake?"

"That sounds like an excellent idea," Harry responded. The waiter, who spent far too much time staring at Fleur than Harry thought was appropriate, had already left their check. Harry paid it generously and they left the restaurant.

There were still some students lingering in the town as they walked back to the carriages, but not many. The ride back was rather uneventful. Fleur held one of his hands in her lap and rested her head on his shoulder. They talked of nothing in particular.

When they arrived back on the school grounds Fleur led him from the small transport carriage to the large Beauxbaton's carriage. Harry was surprised that some of the French students chatted happily with him.

He was again struck by the elaborate decorations as he entered the carriage. Fleur took a moment to remove her cloak and summon an elf. She communicated with it in French, before it disappeared. Harry moved toward where she'd led him the last time he visited, but she stopped him.

"No. We won't use one of ze sitting rooms zis time. Follow me," she said and walked through the entrance and down a couple of narrow hallways. Harry noticed the carriage seemed considerably less populated the further she led him through it. Eventually she led him down a secluded hallway filled with doors that didn't appear to have any opening mechanism. She pressed her finger against one of the doors and it shimmered away before his eyes. Fleur gestured for him to enter and he did.

Once inside he gazed around a messy room. Messy may have been too strong of a word, but it certainly had a 'lived in' feel.

"I am sorry for ze mess," Fleur said. "But I get annoyed when it is spotless."

"Me too," Harry said. "You get your own room?"

"Yes," Fleur responded. "But only because I am ze champion. I 'ad two roommates when I arrived. But when I was selected zey gave me my own room."

"That's a nice perk," Harry responded, gazing around. The room certainly wasn't large. It had a medium-sized bed, a desk, a dresser, and a closet. A small couch completely covered one of the walls. There was a closed door that Harry assumed led to a bathroom.

"It is. There isn't much furniture, though," she said. Harry couldn't help but think she looked rather flustered. She picked up and put away some clothing very quickly before gesturing to the couch. "Please sit." Harry did.

"Regardless. It's nice. There have been times this year I'd have killed for some privacy," Harry admitted. About that time the elf appeared in the room. It carried a small dessert tray and spoke to Fleur in French. She thanked it and it left.

Dessert consisted of a variety of small dishes that would last only a couple of bites.

"I didn't know what kind of dessert you liked," Fleur said. "So I asked for a sample platter."

"They all look good," Harry said. Fleur floated the tray over in front of him before joining him on the couch.

"I'm glad you think so," she said before taking a moment to explain what each of the desserts was before having him sample them. They were all delicious in their own way. But his favorite, by far, was the lemon soufflé.

They lost track of time simply eating and talking. The conversation still focused heavily on the tournament, but they exchanged other stories as well. Fleur was rather interested in the Quidditch World Cup. At least she acted like she was. She talked a lot of her trip to Florence over the summer, which made Harry admit he'd really love to travel.

Neither of them expected it when Fleur's room went completely black. Harry jumped to his feet and reached for his wand.

"Shit," Fleur muttered from next to him.

"What?" Harry said, trying to look for anything unusual in the dark. Fleur lit a few candles with her wand as he did.

"Zat is our 'light's out' warning," she explained. "I did not realize it was zat late."

"So I should be going then?" He asked with a yawn. He hadn't realized just how tired he was."

"You can't," Fleur replied simply.

"I'll be fine. I've already explained my penchant for sneaking around at night. And I haven't gotten into nearly enough mischief this year." He tried to sound confident about that. Part of him wished that he'd brought the invisibility cloak. He idly wondered why he simply didn't have that with him at all times. It certainly could be handy in a pinch.

"No. Zey charm ze hallways. An alarm goes off if anyone steps into one. It happened on our first night here. One of ze students tried to sneak to ze kitchens. It was most annoying. Kept everyone up for nearly an hour," Fleur explained.

"I see," Harry said. "Well I guess I can sleep on the couch. Wish I'd have brought some pajamas, though." Fleur stood when he finished speaking. She walked over to the dresser and opened the top drawer. Harry saw her take what appeared to be a t-shirt and a pair of athletic shorts. She muttered some French incantations and then held up a plain white t-shirt about his size, and a basic pair of pajama bottoms that also appeared to be about his size.

"Will these work?" she asked.

"They should," he responded. He couldn't help but think of what Ron's reaction would be when he told him he wore Fleur's pajamas to bed.

"Good. You can change in the bathroom," she said, offering the garments to him. He nodded and walked into the bathroom with the clothing. He changed quickly, she'd judged his size rather well. He then made sure his old clothing was folded neatly and stepped out of the bathroom and back into the dark bedroom. Fleur had changed,

she now wore a lightweight pink cotton top. She was also sitting up, under the covers, on the bed.

"The couch is terrible, too, 'Arry," she said. "You can sleep in ze bed. Just do not try anything or I will 'ave to hurt you."

"Are you sure?" Harry asked. He'd have to remember to edit out that part when telling the story. What kind of idiot questions Fleur Delacour about hopping into a bed with her?

"Yes," she said. "The bed is easily big enough for the both of us." She scooted herself as far to one side as she could as if that helped prove her point. Harry couldn't resist. He moved to the other side of it and slid under the covers. The bed smelled wonderfully like her. He inhaled deeply as his head hit the pillow. A sheer feeling of longing filled his body. His heart ached against his chest as it never had before. Fleur simply shifted onto her side as well.

"I should thank you, 'Arry," she said. "I don't 'ave many good first dates. But tonight was fun."

"You're welcome, Fleur," he said. He should have probably left it at that, but it sounded awkward so he continued. "I really enjoyed myself too. It was my first actual date. I'm just not sure if I'll actually be able to fall asleep now."

"We can chat until you get tired," she said.

"Oh I'm tired. I'm just nervous too," he admitted.

"Zair is nothing to be nervous about," she said. "Just stay on your side of ze bed and you will not be harmed. Besides. I can help you sleep."

"How's that?" Harry asked, feeling legitimately curious about that at this point. Fleur just focused her eyes on his. He felt inexplicably drawn to her for a moment before she spoke.

"Bonne nuit mon trésor," she sang quietly. "Ferme tes yeux et dors." Her voice was so quietly he could barely hear her. His eyelids started to feel impossibly heavy. He closed his eyes for a moment, fully intending to open them after just a moment of rest. She inched closer to him and continued. "Bonne nuit mon trésor. Ferme tes

yeux et dors." Harry could do nothing more than obey. He was asleep before she finished the first two words of the lullaby for the third time. Of course, the song took its toll on her as well. She was asleep almost as soon as her head rested back onto the pillow.

Author's Note: I have very little to say about this chapter as well. I liked writing the first half of it more than the second, but enjoyed it overall. Of course, I know what comes next. I'm almost hesitant to admit that as the chapters I like have been rather different than the chapters the reviewers like. But oh well.

Next up is mostly prep for the third task, the only one I'm changing from the book, as I need the quidditch pitch to not have a gigantic hedge growing out of it. The concept will be fairly similar, though.

I'm still experiencing the error when attempting to create new content. I've found what appears to be a way around it, although it may result in my Harry/Luna fic being posted as a crossover between Minesweeper and Gran Turismo. We'll see. Apparently you can edit it after. Well, everything except the characters. Anyway, I need to re-read it before I publish it anyway. But it's received positive reviews from betas. However, I do not think it is a story that will interest everyone.

Done rambling now. Thanks for the reviews, I appreciate all of them. When I started this I didn't think anyone would actually read it, much less review it, so thanks to all of you. As always, I'm willing to answer pretty much any non-spoiler question if it's left in a review or sent via a PM. Just don't review anonymously with a question. I can't respond to those. A PM is also likely the best way to contact me about anything. Thanks for your support, I hope you enjoy the update.

Chapter 16

Preparations

Something felt off when morning finally came. Harry lay in that incoherent state where he knew he was awake, but really didn't want to be awake. He groaned quietly and wondered just why his eyelids felt so heavy. He also wondered why he couldn't really move. That was a bit concerning. He felt like something far heavier, and really, far warmer, than the usual blankets rested on him.

Smelled better, too. Rather than that distinctly overly-cleaned linen smell there was a certain familiar, flowery scent. It was nice. But it was also different. And different was not a particularly welcome one when he felt dazed and confused as to his actual location. But he was comfortable, and a flowery scent wasn't particularly threatening.

He found his hands started to trace them around the surrounding area. The bed had soft sheets and thick blankets. He appeared to be rather close to one of the edges of the bed. He decided to become a tad bolder. He let his hands explore what was using him as a pillow. He lifted his hands just above his chest, before slowly bringing them down onto a soft mass of silky hair.

He ran his fingers nervously through the hair, twirling a few loose strands briefly as the memories of the night before came rushing back to him. Why had he spent the night here? To avoid some kind of alarm? That seemed like a remarkably weak excuse.

His hands located a neck underneath the mass of soft hair. Fleur's neck, he recalled. He suddenly felt bad for her dragon. Whatever enchantment she'd used certainly had a disorienting effect when one finally woke up. This certainly wasn't the way he'd expected to be shown how to perform the spell when he'd asked.

Harry let his hand trace down over her back slowly. She shifted slightly against his touch. The movement caught him unawares so he stopped, for a moment. But she didn't say anything, so he simply assumed that she was still asleep. His hands traced down through the last bit of hair and rested on the small of her back.

He paused for a moment as she shifted again. He had to admit, he rather enjoyed the shifting. But he was starting to worry that she'd

wake up and yell at him. He kept his eyes closed, hoping that made him appear more innocent than he actually was.

Fleur shifted against him once more, burying her face in his neck. He could feel her warm, even, breath on his neck. It was rather nice. Had he not known she was sleeping he would have assumed the gentle brush of her lips on his neck had been intentional. But it felt nice, even if she didn't know she was doing it.

He didn't particularly feel like moving yet, so instead he just kept running his hands, very slowly, up and down her back. He let his mind wander. First he tried to think about Krum and the flying lessons. But that just made him realize how sore he was. So his mind shifted to Fleur. But that just made him think about things that would likely get him into trouble. So instead he thought about Daphne. Unfortunately, that also led to him thinking about things that would get him into trouble. After a while he decided it best to simply not think. So he focused on his hands, and how soft Fleur's silvery-blond hair was. He couldn't help but marvel at how fragile she seemed to be as she slept.

He'd have to thank Roger, or Hooch, or somebody. At the start of the school year he would have probably just felt scrawny. But forced runs and conditioning had certainly helped. He couldn't help but wonder if he could take Dudley physically now. He doubted it. Dudley was still significantly larger than him. But it would be considerably easier to outrun him now.

However, it seemed to be bad form to be thinking of Dudley while in a bed with Fleur. Of course, he couldn't help but think of just how jealous Dudley would be if he could see him now. Which led into a fantastic mental picture of introducing Fleur to the Dursleys.

His hands may have drifted a tad too far south as he thought about that. But Fleur didn't seem to notice. Well, she shifted slightly against him again, but that was about it. At least that's what he thought until she spoke.

"Didn't I say you were to stay on your side of ze bed, 'Arry?" she asked blearily.

"Yes. And if you notice. I am on my side of the bed. Rather close to falling off of it too," Harry said as he opened his eyes and finally

looked down at her. He couldn't see much, just a swath of hair nuzzled into his neck, followed by the blankets that covered the rest of their bodies. Fleur reached an arm out as if checking his claim.

"You're right," she yawned. "What time is it?"

"No idea," Harry responded, gazing around the room for a clock. Fleur rolled off of him, which was very disappointing, and picked up a watch from her bedside table.

"Oh no," she said and very quickly jumped out of the bed and started picking clothing out of her closet.

"What's up?" Harry asked as he sat groggily up in the bed.

"I am supposed to 'ave breakfast with Madame Maxime in fifteen minutes," Fleur said.

"That could be a problem," Harry said, yawning again. "I'm probably going to be late for practice. That spell you used is sure strong."

"Oui. Now close your eyes. I need to change," she said. Harry obeyed, but that didn't prevent her from adding. "And if you peek zen I will hex your eyes out."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Harry said, keeping his eyes firmly closed. It seemed like an easy way to earn props.

"I would 'ope you do dream of it," Fleur teased. "You can open your eyes now." Harry did. She'd changed into a Beauxbatons uniform and was putting her hair into a loose bun.

"Well I do," Harry blushed. "But you don't need to know that."

"Nonsense," Fleur laughed. "I rather like knowing zat. Now change while I brush my teeth." She stepped into her bathroom. Harry heard the water running. He got out of bed slowly, stretching a bit. He quickly realized the only thing he had to change into was the clothing he'd worn out the night before. It didn't take him long to get it back on. Fleur stepped out of the bathroom immediately as he did. He had the sneaking suspicion she was spying on him.

"Good, you've changed," Fleur said. "Now 'ow do I look?"

"I think you look great," Harry said. Fleur just rolled her eyes though.

"Well I appreciate zat," she said. "I am sorry for ze rush, but Madame does not like to be kept waiting."

"Well you shouldn't keep her waiting, then," Harry said. "Oh, I didn't know where you wanted that." He gestured to the clothing that had served as his pajamas the night before.

"Oh, just leave it. I will take care it later," she said. "Now let us go." She reached out and took his hand, pulling him from her room.

The hallway was deserted, as it had been the night before. Harry expected Fleur didn't reside in the same areas as the rest of the general students. That had to be another handy perk for being the champion.

She led him toward the entrance of the carriage. He vaguely remembered the path from the night before. When they did run into some students, they mostly gave him curious glances. He wasn't quite sure what to make of it. Some of the Beauxbatons students appeared to be judging him, others merely gave him a curt nod. All of their eyes were drawn to the fact that Fleur was holding his hand. Quite a few of them stopped and spoke to Fleur briefly. They spoke in French, Harry could only pick out a word or two here and there, but it sounded mostly like she just exchanged pleasantries with her friends. The conversations really reminded him of how students approached him after various tasks and matches.

Many of the students tried to talk to him as well, but still in French. Those conversations ended quickly. Fleur exchanged the required pleasantries for him. Eventually, they stepped back into the entrance area of the carriage.

"I 'ad fun last night 'Arry. I 'ope we can do it again soon," she said as she walked him to the door.

"Me too, Fleur," he said. "I'm sorry I made you late for breakfast."

"Zat would be my own fault, 'Arry," she said before leaning in and giving him a very quick peck on the cheek. Harry inwardly marveled at how innocent it all was. Even Daphne was more forward and

abrupt. After that, they went their separate ways. She slipped back into the carriage, heading to breakfast with her headmistress, and Harry traveled outside.

Of course, he soon realized he wasn't sure what time it was. No one flew around the pitch, though, so he figured he at least had time to head back to the Great Hall to grab something to eat, and maybe even to Gryffindor Tower to change into something much less formal.

The first students that saw him, though, pointed to a newspaper and started chatting very quickly to each other in hushed tones. Harry figured it had to be something more than his disheveled appearance.

The reaction in the Great Hall was fairly similar. There was a noticeable hush as he entered, but that didn't last particularly long. Students from all four of the house tables stared at him for a brief moment, before they went back to doing whatever they had been doing.

Harry felt this warranted further investigation, so he quickly found his friends at the Gryffindor table. Ron spoke almost immediately as he sat down.

"Is it true?" he asked.

"Of course it's not," Hermione said bluntly.

"But he wasn't in his room last night!" Ron retorted. So apparently his absence hadn't gone unnoticed.

"He goes to bed later than you almost every night, and wakes up earlier than you every morning," Hermione argued. Both Harry and Ron knew she was right about that, too. "I hardly think you're one to judge whether or not he was there."

"Dean didn't get back till midnight," Ron argued. "And he said that Harry wasn't in bed at that point. At least he didn't see him."

"And was he looking?" Hermione asked, crossing her arms and completely ignoring her food.

"I seriously hope not," Harry said.

"No, he wasn't. Just didn't remember seeing him," Ron added.

"Well I don't remember seeing Lavender this morning," Hermione commented. "That doesn't mean she wasn't sleeping in her bed right next to mine!"

"Yes, but Lavender is dressed normally. Harry's wearing what he changed into for his date last night!" Ron said. His expression indicated that he felt this new piece of information sealed the argument in his favor.

"You can't hardly know that. You didn't hang out with him before he left. For all you know he just felt like looking nice today. Perhaps he's doing something with someone after practice," Hermione argued. Harry was glad she didn't point out that his shirt would be in drastic need of ironing if he really were attempting to look presentable.

"You know," he said after letting his friends bicker for a few more moments. "You could always just ask me."

"I already did that!" Ron said. "I asked if it was true!"

"Yes, but I have no idea what you're talking about," Harry pointed out. "And that makes it rather difficult to answer the question."

"This," Hermione said, grabbing a copy of The Daily Prophet from a nearby Gryffindor girl and handing it to him. Harry looked down at it and shook his head.

Harry Potter's French Folly!

Rita Skeeter

Hello my anxious readers! I, Rita Skeeter, your faithful journalist whom devotes a great deal of her time to make sure you get only the best, truthful information concerning the Triwizard Tournament, have finally figured out why the young Mr. Potter has been so difficult to obtain an interview with.

You see, he's already been snared by someone, or perhaps something is a better way to put it, else.

My faithful followers may remember a column I penned last fall where I expertly exposed how the champion from the Beauxbaton's Academy of Magic, one Fleur Delacour, used her Veela heritage to trick the Goblet of Fire into choosing her. At the time I questioned her qualifications for being in such a prestigious tournament. Now all I can say is it is clear she is overmatched, and it is truly a shame that one of the more skilled Beauxbatons students was not chosen to represent the school.

At the very least the demi-human does not appear to be in position to challenge for the overall individual championship.

This revelation; however, merely creates more questions. One must wonder just what the Beauxbaton's Academy of Magic is thinking. We know they've been one of the more progressive schools since the last Great War, but to allow themselves to be represented by a half-breed? And if this half-breed could charm her way into the tournament what prevented her from say, charming our own Mr. Potter into the tournament?

One anonymous parent told me that, "It's a shame such trash represents the fine institution I choose to send my daughter to." Really it is a shame Headmaster Dumbledore and Headmistress Maxime let this disgrace go this far.

"She really likes Fleur," Harry said as he looked up from the page.

"It gets worse when she starts to talk about you," Ron responded and pointed at the continuation of the article.

"Ooh, I can't wait!" Harry said dryly as he went back to reading the article.

But now onto the actual story! You see, ferocious readers, yesterday evening I joined a coalition of reporter friends for an early dinner in Hogsmeade. And what did I find walking through that very same town?

You guessed it! The Hogwarts Champion and apple of all of our eyes, Harry Potter, walking hand in hand with Miss Delacour. And let me tell you, a court flower she is not!

The two were very obviously having a romantic evening. It may have been sweet. The dreamy, loving look in young Harry's striking green eyes was palpable. Had his companion been a human, it may have been touching.

But human Miss Delacour is not. It was obvious she wanted to avoid the reporters at all cost. She practically dragged young Harry away from us. And all we wanted was a few moments of their time, and a few answers to some serious questions!

We did manage to get one quote out of Mr. Potter, though. "I'm not charmed, Rita," he told me. But the dreamy tone in his voice suggested otherwise. It's clear to anyone just how this Veela managed to get her hooks into Harry. And it's obvious he only said exactly what she wanted him to say.

Unfortunately, the students escaped us noble reporters for a minute. My colleagues didn't feel the matter was worth perusing, but I knew otherwise!

I caught up with them outside of the Shrieking Shack. Young Harry was telling Fleur the most grandiose stories. If he were to be believed he not only murdered poor Professor Quirrell, but also Slytherin's monster, a basilisk, in his second year!

He even claimed to have a living godfather. Although he did not divulge the name to the Veela. Still, if one of my loyal readers knew the Potters well, perhaps we could put a stop to such nonsense.

Clearly he is delusional and has spent far too much time in a world where his made up stories are believed. Headmaster Dumbledore obviously needs to inflict harsher punishment on the boy's lies. One can only hope he doesn't become dangerous when he realizes he's making it all up.

Eventually, the two dined at a local Hogsmeade restaurant. Their meal was uneventful. The really juicy bit happens next.

You see the Veela invited young Harry back to the Beauxbatons carriage under the guise of having dessert. I watched from afar as they entered the carriage. I waited patiently for Harry to emerge again, hoping against hope to get a honest answer from the boy's lips.

But he did not emerge. I waited in vain for five hours, until I knew I had to flee back home to make the deadline for the morning paper to bring this news to you!

Clearly we've lost an English icon to a French temptress. Something must be done immediately.

"So is it true?" Ron asked.

"No. She can't charm inanimate objects. She told me that," Harry said. "You'd think I'd have noticed Rita following us, too."

"That's not what I was asking about, you prat," Ron responded.

"Oh. Well we don't know the third task yet, so it's hard to say whether or not Fleur is in position to win. I wouldn't rule her out, though," Harry said, knowing full well he was simply irritating his friend. Ron rolled his eyes. Hermione looked torn between scolding him and laughing.

"Come on man, just tell me if it's true!" Ron begged, sounding angrier with each passing second.

"You're going to have to be more specific than that, Ron," Harry said as he picked up some toast. Ron glared at him.

"You know what I'm talking about!" he argued. Harry did, but he was having fun. He was about to respond when Viktor entered the hall and sat next to Hermione.

"Potter," Krum said. "Is annoying reporter right? Did you spend the entire night with the French witch?" Harry couldn't help but wonder if Krum referred to him as 'scrawny English seeker' when he conversed with his Durmstrang friends.

"I did, Viktor," Harry responded. Viktor laughed loudly and clasped him hard on the back.

"Well done!" the Bulgarian almost yelled. "You are very lucky! Hopefully she did not wear you out too much. Or it will be too easy to kill you this afternoon!" Hermione gasped at that insinuation. Ron turned bright red and immediately looked at his food.

"Oh Harry, you didn't!" Hermione gasped.

"We didn't do anything," Harry couldn't help but blush as well. "I just wound up stuck there after curfew." Hermione crossed her arms and looked at him appraisingly.

"So Skeeter's article is true," she said.

"Well. Kind of. She actually got the date surprisingly accurate. And I really didn't see her at all. She's good," Harry commented.

"She's a rubbish reporter, Harry, don't praise her," Hermione scolded. "You realize how poorly this is going to reflect on the two of you, right?"

"Oh come on, Hermione, no one is going to actually believe this," Harry responded.

"No. Hermione is right. But the negative press does not last. Next few weeks should be interesting," Krum said.

"Well that's pleasant," Harry said. Krum shrugged.

"Do not give an interview. They will simply talk about it with each other. Soon they will become bored and find something new to talk about," Viktor said.

"That works?" Harry asked.

"Yes. They have short attention spans. And you are a minor, there is little they can reasonably do to you. It will probably be worse for the French girl."

"Alright then. Are we going to practice today?" Harry asked, taking another bite from a piece of toast.

"Are you sure you're not too exhausted from your night?" Krum joked.

"Don't think that matters, Viktor. Without practice I'm not going to beat you," Harry deadpanned. Krum laughed once more as a full

smile spread across his lips. Harry could tell he appreciated the comment.

"Good, you are learning. I may make a seeker out of you yet," Krum responded.

The next few weeks settled into a very normal routine for Harry. He practiced every day, sometimes with Krum, and sometimes with his team. At first, Davies was annoyed by the Bulgarian's attention in his seeker, but when he saw the drastic improvements, he stopped commenting.

Harry even picked up going to classes. Well, at least most of them. He still didn't bother with Divination. He wasn't particularly sure why, he just did. Flying was becoming a tad boring, and he found he needed a break from it for a few hours every now and again.

Alicia was back at practice within a week of her injury, but Pomfrey had only cleared her for light drills and she did little more than fly around on her broom and play catch with Ginny or Cho while the rest of the team drilled.

Still, her presence was a boon for George, who was back to his old self nearly immediately after seeing her able to fly around on the broom. Of course it probably helped that she gave him a nice big kiss and said she knew it wasn't his fault. Or maybe it was that she threatened castration if he didn't beat Durmstrang in the finals. They did feel more like a team with Alicia back, though, and that alone was a positive.

Unfortunately, he didn't see much of Fleur as time passed, a fact Daphne never ceased to point out, especially after she showed up to every practice to cheer him on. The Beauxbatons' seeker, Sophie Sinclair, stopped by one of the practices to explain that Madame Maxime was severely disappointed in the negative publicity brought upon by Fleur's actions. And as such, Fleur was on carriage arrest for the next few weeks.

Harry thought that was a tad harsh, and Sophie agreed with him. But Madame Maxime didn't particularly care about students' opinions. Daphne, however, found it rather comical. As did most of the members of the team. The twins offered him the use of something they

called darkness powder if he wished to go and see her. He'd thanked them, but said he could figure out another way.

Still, Fleur's disciplinary sentence made things harder on him. The reporters quickly learned about it, and quickly started to question him about it. Harry didn't really know how to respond. He debated telling the truth, but he didn't want anything to reflect poorly on Fleur, and since he didn't know what her version of the events were, there was little he could say past 'no comment.'

The reporters were far from happy with that answer. But then again, Harry was far from happy with it as well. And it certainly didn't help that he hadn't been able to see her or communicate with her.

But that was how the middle of the spring term passed. Harry found himself immersed in quidditch and class. He learned everything he could, assuming it would help him in some way or another, and waited for the third task to be announced.

He didn't have to wait long. One day as he was practicing with Krum one of the sponsors approached them and said the task would be revealed that evening, and they should come back to the pitch that night to see what it would be.

Harry was rather excited. He wanted to stop practicing and go tell his friends. Krum didn't think that was such a good idea, and instead pushed the two of them harder and longer than he had before. Harry had barely managed to shower and change his clothing before returning to the pitch that evening.

He was the last champion to arrive. Krum stood off in a corner looking at the sponsors, who were joined by Ludo Bagman and a group of reporters. The reporters looked entirely too excited for his tastes as they attempted to question Fleur. Madame Maxime answered all of the questions for Fleur, who merely stood around with her arms crossed looking perturbed.

She looked over at Harry when he arrived and gave him a brief, but warm, smile. Of course, that action didn't go unnoticed by the reporters, and they immediately asked her more questions. As they did, Harry moved over toward Cedric. The two Hogwarts students talked for a moment before he heard Fleur yell.

"Enough! Does 'e look like 'e is charmed? Is it so unbelievable zat we actually like each other? Maybe we would give an interview if every question wasn't degrading to each of us!" Harry looked over to see Fleur flushed with anger, speaking adamantly with her hands and looking ready to cause bodily harm to one of the reporters.

"Apparently it is, Fleur," Harry said dryly over his shoulder, before turning back to Cedric and asking about the dueling competition.

"See!" Fleur said. "'E is obviously not following me around like your stupid puppy analogy! I 'ave 'ad enough of zis." She moved through the group of reporters and joined Harry by Cedric. She took his hand as she stood next to him. Harry heard the flashbulbs go off behind them.

Thankfully, Bagman eventually decided to speak up.

"Great! It looks like everyone has arrived. Unfortunately my colleague Mr. Crouch couldn't make it today. But no matter," Bagman paused for a moment. Harry took that moment to exchange a knowing glance with Krum.

"We have not seen Mr. Crouch in a while. I understood he was the primary planner of this," Viktor said, taking advantage of Bagman's pausing.

"We both planned it," Bagman claimed. He looked rather annoyed at the Bulgarian's question. "But he's sick. He's been sick for a while."

"Odd," Krum said. Some of the reporters murmured behind them. Apparently they also thought it was odd. Harry heard them discuss when was the last time they'd actually seen Mr. Crouch. Bagman sensed he was losing his audience, so he plowed on bravely.

"Anyway. I am here to tell you what the final task of the Triwizard Tournament will be. It is a two part task that will pit you against a series of obstacles, including each other. We are going import four separate challenge environments that you will have to navigate through.

"These environments will be based on differing periods of magical history. There will be an ancient Egyptian pyramid, a gothic fortress, a Greco-Roman temple, and an Islamic mosque. Once inside the

contestants will face three challenges inside their individual location. You will draw lots to determine which individual challenges you must face. However, Mr. Potter and Mr. Diggory will enter first, being tied for the lead will enter first, followed by Mr. Krum and Miss Delacour.

"But that's not it. Once you complete the tasks, champions, you'll open a door which will lead into the culmination of the final task.

"We will magically erect a maze above the Hogwarts grounds. Once inside you will be tasked with journeying to the center of the maze. Again, you will face a series of randomly placed obstacles. And you must be on your guard, these obstacles are designed to be fatal.

"The task will end only when one of you makes it to the center of the maze where the Triwizard Cup will be placed in the center of the maze. Once one of the champions touches it, the maze will dissolve and that champion will have won the tournament. Any questions from the champions?" Bagman gazed at them. None of the champions spoke. They looked around at each other for a few moments. Bagman continued after a few moments of their silence.

"Now it is important to note that none of the individual challenges contain anything that will be found on the curriculums of any of the schools. So in the sake of fairness, the champions will each receive a set of books that will provide information that will help with understanding the tasks they may be presented with," Bagman explained. As he did one of the sponsors walked forward and gave each of the champions a package of books. They each looked at the books for a few moments.

"Now, are there any questions?" Bagman asked again. Again, the champions had no question. But the reporters did. They clarified things like who was designing the events, and the date and time of the final task. As well as how much of an advantage Cedric and Harry would have.

Finally, they closed with another photo session. Harry and Fleur stood between Cedric and Viktor. Harry's arm was noticeably around the French girl's waist. After they answered brief, mostly inane questions on their opinions of the final task. Eventually, Cedric and Krum left. Harry and Fleur lingered for a moment until a young female reporter approached them.

"I'm sorry," she started. "My editor will kill me if I don't even attempt to ask. Have you entered into a relationship with Fleur, Harry?" It was the first time someone hadn't accused him of being charmed in the same question. Harry just looked at Fleur.

"I'm not sure. You'd have to ask Fleur. We've been friends for a while, and we had a very fun date. But I don't know if we've decided on anything," he said, choosing his words carefully. The reporter perked up a little bit at not getting the standard refusal of answering a personal question.

"Well, Fleur?" she asked. Fleur just looked at the reporter for a few moments before turning toward Harry and giving him a very deep, lingering kiss. Harry heard the flashbulbs go off as he once again marveled at the softness of Fleur's lips. It didn't last nearly as long as Harry would have liked. She pulled away and just smiled at the reporter.

"I will let you make your own judgment on zat," she said. "But now I must return to ze carriage. Good night, 'Arry," she said. Harry watched her go, standing and smiling. The reporter attempted to ask him something, but he wasn't paying attention. Instead he was thinking of just what he was going to try that night.

It didn't take Harry very long to get back to Gryffindor tower. He quickly traveled to the fourth year boy dorm and deposited the newly gifted books into his trunk. Next he grabbed the invisibility cloak and left the tower. Well, he attempted to, but he was stopped.

"Harry!" Colin Creevey said, snapping a very quick picture with his camera. "What's the last task!" Harry noticed quite a few of his house members were in the common room, and they all seemed interested in the answer.

"Oh. Uhm. It's a series of mazes. We have to find the cup in the middle of the second one. First person to grab it wins," Harry explained.

"That's it?" Angelina Johnson asked.

"Well, they're putting stuff in the maze," Harry said. "And we don't know what that is. But they gave us some books to look through."

"That doesn't sound too hard," Colin said.

"I'm sure it'll be harder than it seems. If it wasn't they wouldn't give us as much time to prepare. Bagman did indicate that failure at any part of it could be fatal."

"Are you scared?" Colin asked. The younger boy looked frightened simply thinking about it.

"Not yet," Harry said. "But ask me that again before the task. Now if you excuse me, Colin." Harry moved past the younger boy. It was still early enough in the evening, being just after the evening meal, that no one questioned him leaving the common room.

Harry took the quickest route to the Entrance Hall, tossing the cloak around his shoulders as he went. Naturally, no one noticed as he left the castle and headed toward the Beauxbaton's carriage. He snuck in when no one was looking.

The next part was a tad more difficult. Not only did he have to avoid the Beauxbaton's students whom lingered in the hallway, but he had to remember just which room he was heading to. It took him the better part of twenty minutes and at least three wrong turns, but he did finally find himself in a familiar, near deserted, hallway. He walked up to a door and knocked. Nothing happened. He waited a few minutes and tried again. Still nothing.

That wasn't how he'd planned it. He'd imagined a confused Fleur answering the door and looking around the hallway. He'd sneak in then, reveal himself, and she'd be thrilled to see him. It would all be good fun.

But she didn't appear to be in her room. He paced down the hallway, wondering where she could be. It occurred to him that it didn't particularly matter where she was because he didn't know where anything in the Beauxbaton's carriage was anyway. When he finally got back to the door he assumed was Fleur's he could think of nothing to do but knock again.

He waited for a few moments, feeling his heart drop in his chest as he did. But finally, the door opened. Fleur looked around, looking

confused. She leaned out of the door and looked down the hallway in either direction. She shrugged and stepped back into her room.

"Hello Fleur," Harry said, taking off the cloak as she closed the door. She jumped and pressed herself into the wall, looking white as a ghost. She was already in her pajamas, which consisted of a pair of linen shorts and a tank top.

"Mon Dieu!" she gasped. "'Arry! 'Ow did you get here?"

"This," he said, holding up the invisibility cloak. "I told you I had it."

"I 'ave never seen one," she eyed it carefully, before holding out her hand. "May I?"

"Yea, sure," he gave it to her. She wrapped it around her shoulders and went to look in the mirror, laughing as she saw her floating head.

"Zat is amazing," Fleur said, before sliding the cloak over her head and prancing around the room. Harry gazed around at where he assumed she would be. After a few moments, he realized how pointless that was, and likely how stupid he looked, so he instead looked around her room.

He noticed she'd already started on the books they'd been given. Sufi Mysticism lay open on her bed. The other books were neatly stacked on her bedside table. He gazed into her bathroom, mostly because the door was open, and noticed a lazily hung towel and a pile of clothing. She must have been cleaning up when he'd knocked the first time.

He turned back around looking for Fleur. But there was still no sign of her in the room. He gazed around for another moment before something nailed him very hard in the chest, completely knocking the wind out of him. He found himself knocked onto Fleur's bed, landing rather uncomfortably on her book.

"Ouch," he said, sitting up a little bit.

"Sorry," Fleur giggled from somewhere near the foot of the bed. Harry pulled the book out from underneath his back and placed it carefully next to him as Fleur appeared at the foot of the bed. "Are you okay?"

"Yea, I'm fine," Harry said, stretching a bit on her bed. She folded the cloak neatly and placed it on her bedside table.

"Zat is an awesome cloak. I shudder at 'ow you could abuse it," she said, laying next to him on the bed. They both just stared at the ceiling.

"I haven't really. Well, apart from the times I told you about," he said.

"What, no sneaking into ze female showers after practice?" Fleur teased.

"No, never," Harry said quickly. He hadn't even considered it. Well, seriously considered it.

"Very noble of you," Fleur teased.

"If you insist," Harry responded.

"I do. I am glad you snuck out to see me," she said.

"Me too. So what were you doing before I stopped by?" Harry asked. He felt infinitely lame, but he couldn't think of a better way to start the conversation.

"Showering," Fleur teased.

"Before that?" Harry asked sheepishly.

"Changing," Fleur replied coquettishly.

"Before that?" Harry gulped. Part of him hoped that conversation kept going down that path.

"Oh. Nothing really. I was reading ze books zey gave us. Zey are rather interesting," Fleur said.

"I haven't looked at them yet," Harry admitted.

"I wouldn't expect you 'ad. You 'ave only 'ad them for an hour," she said.

"Hermione would have read one by now," Harry said.

"Well she is not in ze tournament. And she is not spending time with her French girlfriend," Fleur said.

"No, but that might be fun to watch," Harry commented. Fleur swatted him. "So, you're my girlfriend, then?" he added after a moment.

"I thought I made zat obvious earlier," Fleur said.

"Sometimes I'm a bit slow," Harry commented.

"Apparently," Fleur said. She rolled onto her side and propped herself up on her elbow and looked at him.

"Us kissing is going to make quite a few papers, you know," Harry said, turning his head slightly to the side to look into her eyes.

"I know. I already received a lecture from Madame Maxime. But at ze very least it will give zem something better to talk about zan whether or not I 'ave charmed you," Fleur said.

"Hopefully. It may backfire, though," Harry said.

"It might," Fleur agreed. "But after ze tournament zey will 'ave nothing unusual to focus on. Zey will 'opefully leave us alone."

"That would be nice," Harry admitted. "I wonder if there is something we can do before then."

"We could try to give an interview. But zat could also backfire. We would 'ave to be picky on who we picked to do it," she explained. Harry nodded.

"I don't know anything about reporters," Harry admitted.

"Either do I. I could ask my father. 'E 'as more experience in zese matters. 'E is also eager to meet you."

"That's a scary thought," Harry said.

"Nonsense! 'E is very sweet. You will like him," Fleur assured him. "Now, you implied zat you were learning French in your letters. 'Ow did zat work out?"

"It didn't," Harry confessed. "I never really did much more than read a few books and attempt to memorize some vocabulary. My friend tried to drill me a couple of times, but when the tournament started we both fell out of the habit."

"So you speak no French?" Fleur asked. Harry immediately felt bad. He mustered up all of his courage for his next sentence.

"Non. Je parle Français, mais ne bien pas," Harry said. Fleur smiled a bit more warmly than he expected.

"That is not bad, 'Arry," she said. "You still need work, but you will learn quickly."

"You're going to teach me French?" Harry asked.

"Oui. You must learn if you want to win points with my parents. Zey do not really like ze English. If you do not make zem speak English zey will like you more. Even if your French is terrible, zey will appreciate ze effort," she explained. He couldn't argue with that logic. Winning favor with his girlfriend's parents seemed like a good idea. He tilted his head and looked at Fleur for a moment. Girlfriend. That would take a little bit of getting used to.

"Well, I'll do my best," Harry said, still looking up into Fleur's eyes.

"I know you will. You seem incapable of not doing your best. It is remarkable to watch. Part of me wishes I did not 'ave to compete in ze final task simply so I could watch you beat it," Fleur said.

"I hope that you're right. It'll be a tough challenge. You're probably in a better position than I am."

"Why do you think that?"

"Well, you're older. You've spent way more time studying magic than I have," Harry commented. He would have thought that a rather obvious answer.

"And all zat time and experience didn't get me past a gaggle of grindylows in ze lake," Fleur said. "You may be younger zan ze other champions. But zair is not a single one, nor a single student in any of ze schools, who could make a passable argument zat you do not deserve to be in ze tournament." Harry wasn't sure if he agreed with that. He was sure there were quite a few Hogwarts students who would attempt to make such an argument. But he was leading the standings heading into the final task, and that had to be worth something.

"I'm glad you think so, Fleur," he said.

"Yes. And you, 'Arry, possess a remarkable gift for learning. Most people take much longer to get ze hang of things. Yet Lilly told me you mastered a summoning charm in a few minutes, and zat you can already cast a Patronus. Most people never ever learn zat charm. And even just watching you with Krum I can see improvements in your flying, and I know nothing about flying!"

"I appreciate that," he said. He could feel himself blushing.

"You should. And I will 'elp you as much as I can with ze final task, 'Arry. You wound up in zis tournament for unknown reasons. You 'ad to do little more zan survive. Yet you 'ave fought and persevered ze entire time. Of ze four of us, you are by far ze most deserving to win." She spoke rather firmly. Harry could have sworn that she inched close to him as she spoke.

"That's crap," Harry said. "We all deserve to win."

"We do," Fleur admitted. Harry could tell she still was torn up by her performance in the second task, and that she didn't particularly believe that statement. "But you deserve it more. Despite 'ow modest you are. Zair is one little zing zat you should work on improving."

"The modesty?" Harry deadpanned. "I'm getting a tad sick of hearing about that. It isn't even something that I think about."

"No. Zat is cute," she said, before leaning down and kissing him softly. Harry let his arms slide around her and kissed her back. She wiggled her body close to his and kept kissing him. Harry kept

kissing her back. He couldn't help but do anything more than marvel at the soft feeling of her lips on his.

She just kept kissing him. Pausing only briefly for trivial things like air. After a few minutes she slowly traced her lips over his neck, pressing them gently to his skin every few moments. Harry was as close to bliss as he'd ever been before. He could think of nothing to do other than lay there and enjoy himself.

Fleur let her lips slide over his throat as she started to kiss the other side of his neck. After a few more moments she slid back up his jaw. Then she kissed the corner of his mouth. Harry tried to tilt his head into the kiss, but she teased him by shifting to the other side of his mouth.

Eventually, she went back to his lips. They kissed deeply. Harry lost himself in her. He was absorbed in her taste, her scent, her everything. He couldn't help but groan when her lips finally pulled away from his. They lay in silence for a moment.

"That was fun," he said carefully. Fleur laughed a little bit.

"Yes. It was," Fleur teased. "We will 'ave to do it again."

"I'm in favor," Harry joked. He saw Fleur check her watch. He figured she didn't want to wind up in the same situation as their first date. "But I should probably leave before light's out this time. My friends noticed before."

"Yes. Zat is probably a good idea." Fleur sat up on the bed. Harry did the same.

"Are you free for lunch tomorrow?" he asked.

"Yes. But I am still being punished for ze other night. I am not supposed to leave ze carriage," she admitted.

"Let me take care of that," Harry said, picking up his cloak and preparing to leave. "Maybe I'll even let you teach me French."

"I look forward to it," Fleur said.

"Me too. I'll come find you at noon." Harry gave her one last smile before slipping the cloak on and leaving her room.

By the next morning Harry had the entire afternoon planned. He just needed some help executing it. And for that, he needed a house elf. Of course, that would have been considerably easier if he actually knew how to summon an elf. But, then again, he was pretty sure that Hogwarts students didn't have access to the school elves. But that just gave him a unique idea.

"Dobby!" he said aloud as he stood alone in the boys' dormitory. He was running late for practice, but he didn't particularly care at that moment. He figured Dobby probably still owed him after the second year. And weird socks so didn't count as a make-up gift.

"Harry Potter!" a familiar voice squeaked behind him.

"Dobby?" Harry nearly jumped. "When did you get here?"

"You summoned me, sir!" Dobby claimed.

"I did?"

"Yes sir! You say the name of the elf while you need something and we will come!" Dobby explained. "But sir, we are not supposed to help the students."

"Surely you can do me a favor though, Dobby?" Harry asked. Dobby looked completely thrilled at the possibility.

"Of course, Harry Potter, sir! Of course. Just do not be asking too much from Dobby. Dobby likes his job and would hate to lose it." The elf looked sheepishly up at him.

"I wouldn't dream of it, Dobby," Harry said. "Really, all I need is some picnic food items."

"Dobby can arrange that!" The elf squealed. "When do you need it by, sir?"

"Before noon?" Harry asked, hoping that didn't give the diminutive servant too little time.

"Dobby can do that, sir!" The elf exclaimed. "Dobby will get to work on that right away! Does Harry Potter have any requests for what should be in his picnic?"

"Not really. Make it diverse. Also, it's for a date with a French girl. So some items that you think may appeal to her would probably be best," Harry said.

"Dobby knows the perfect things! Harry Potter's date will be perfect!"

"I'm sure it will be. Thanks Dobby," Harry said. The elf nodded enthusiastically before popping out of existence. Harry couldn't help but hope that he didn't do anything too absurd.

Practice went on as usual. It was one of the first really warm days of spring, which cheered everyone up. Unfortunately, it also made everyone a little bit lazy. Roger could tell they would all rather lounge around in the sun and be otherwise lazy. So the captain ended practice earlier than he would have normally. But really, they all could use the day off.

Harry quickly showered and walked back to his dormitory to change. He noticed large basket resting on his bed and made a note to buy something nice for Dobby. He peeked inside and was incredibly impressed with the elf. He'd even included a large blanket on top of everything. He decided to buy Dobby something incredibly nice instead.

He change quickly, gathered up the books he was given to help prepare for the task and threw on his invisibility cloak. He spent just a moment shrinking the basket, hoping that wouldn't affect the contents at all.

It took Harry much less time to infiltrate the Beauxbaton's carriage and find Fleur's room. This time she answered readily when he knocked.

"I assume you are under ze cloak?" she asked. He shifted a bit to reveal his head, then offered her part of the cloak.

"Yea. Here, follow me," he said. She looked at him skeptically, but after just a moments reluctance followed. He led her carefully outside, then removed he cloak when they were suitably away from

the carriage. There were plenty of students out about, mostly just enjoying the warmth.

Harry led Fleur over toward a couple of secluded trees near the edge of the grounds.

"This looks good," he said. He sat the basket down and enlarged it, setting it down on the ground.

"A picnic?" Fleur asked. Harry smiled up at her as he sat down on the blanket, leaning back against one of the trees.

"Yea. The weather was nice and I figured that it could be fun. An elf I know prepared the meal. I'm not sure of everything he threw together, but it looks good to me." Harry explained. Fleur sat carefully near the basket and opened it. She looked surprised as she looked in.

"I am impressed. Poivron farci, I 'ave not 'ad those since summer. You know a talented elf. It looks like he packed some fruits, bread and cheese as well. Oh and two pan bagnat. Very nice," Fleur kept looking through the basket, taking things out as she spoke. The first dish she mentioned looked a lot like peppers with something done in middle of them. The last looked like a pretty basic sandwich.

"Good. I told him to try to prepare for a French girl. Wasn't sure what he'd come up with," Harry said. He moved closer to the basket and helped Fleur organize the items she removed.

"It did a good job," Fleur said. Then she gasped rather loudly. "'Arry! It must really like you!"

"Why's that?" he asked. Fleur pulled out what appeared to be a bottle of wine.

"The elf found you a Sancerre?" she asked.

"I, erm, didn't ask him to," Harry said, blushing slightly. "We don't have to drink it."

"Of course we do!" Fleur laughed. "It even packed wine glasses!" she took those out as well, before opening the bottle with a flick of her wand and pouring two glasses. She offered one to Harry.

"I haven't had wine before," Harry admitted as he took the glass. Fleur looked a little startled before lifting her own glass, holding it carefully by the stem. She tilted it up to her nose and took a sip.

"It is good," she said. "Very light. You should enjoy it." Harry nodded and gave it a try, mimicking the way she did it. She was right, it was good. Crisp and fresh were the first two words that came to mind.

"I could get used to that," Harry said, placing it carefully down next to him.

"Yes. 'Opefully you will. Wine is very nice with meals. "Now let's eat!" She started to pass out the main bits of food. Harry was a tad hesitant of the stuffed peppers, but they turned out to be fairly good. They turned out to be rather similar to the tomato dish Fleur had served him in the carriage before. The sandwich was delicious as well. He wasn't particularly sure what was on it, but he assumed tuna. They both ate their share of the food before simply relaxing against the tree, the bottle of wine next to them.

"Well, I enjoyed that," Harry said. Fleur rested her head on his shoulder and took another sip of wine.

"Me too," Fleur admitted. She picked up a chunk of bread they still had and smeared a bit of cheese onto it before offering it to Harry. He took it and she repeated the process for herself.

"Thanks," he said, before eating the bread. When he'd finished chewing he asked. "What would you like to do now?"

"Sit in ze sun and enjoy ze wine," Fleur said quickly before repeating the process with the bread.

"That's fine by me," Harry said, closing his eyes for a moment to fully enjoy the warmth of the sun on his face.

"Unfortunately," Fleur said after a few minutes of silence. "We should at least attempt to be productive. Grab ze Greek book, we will attempt to 'ave our own symposium." Harry nodded and picked up the book. He opened it to the first page and placed it between them.

"Have you read any of this one yet?" He asked.

"No. I 'ave not. But I do 'ave some knowledge of the area. Start reading for us, we shall see 'ow zat goes," she ordered. Harry looked down at the book and simply did as she asked. It was a bit dry to start, focusing mostly on the history of magic in Greece before moving to Italy. It was interesting, Harry especially liked the bit about how the Muggles often thought some of the more powerful wizards were Gods, but it didn't seem all that helpful for their purposes.

Fleur took over when they got to chapter two. It was then that the book started to become helpful. It explained the origins and theories of the magic used by the ancient cultures. Fleur read at a leisurely pace. After a long treatise on a basic dispel method the Greeks used Harry couldn't help but comment.

"I bet they use that for something," he said. "Like the regular spell won't work or something. Just to be confusing."

"You are probably right. They will likely test how closely we've read all of this. We should practice it." Fleur suggested. And so they did. Much to both their surprise, Harry figured out the spell first. He even wound up giving Fleur a couple of pointers that helped her finally get it. After a couple more sips of wine, Harry read the next chapter.

It would have been Hagrid's favorite part of the book, if he were around. It talked of all the dangerous beasts, things like harpies, hydras, and minotaurs. It discussed the best ways to combat them, which usually could be summed up with 'bring a lot of armed friends' or 'run away.'

Fleur took over for the forth chapter, again dealing heavily with magical theory. Except this time they were presented with many magical attack or defense spells. The vast majority seemed more complicated than they had to be. But the pair practiced them anyway.

And that's how they spent the rest of the afternoon. They barely noticed that they finished the wine, or that the sun started to set, as they worked their way through the book. They practiced each spell that it referenced, not quite to perfection, but enough so that they could cast it. Perfection would come later.

They got through nearly the entire book before the temperature started to drop considerably and they decided to call it a day. Fleur had to admit, when they'd started she'd expected Harry to slow her down. But it was far more a meeting of equals. Harry had plenty of experiences to draw from and he learned new spells remarkably quickly.

She knew she learned more from studying with him than she would have on her own. She also knew she'd have to go back through the book she'd read the night before. Harry pointed out every little thing they may have to use in the upcoming task, things she'd largely ignored in the first book.

But, as they exchanged a quick kiss before they parted, each of the champions knew they would be better off studying together before the final task, so they made plans to meet again. After all, they both wanted to win, and they would do their best to be prepared.

Author's Note: Not much to say here. The chapter originally started with Skeeter's article. Which was the third Skeeter article that was supposed to be in the story. The other two simply didn't make the cut. The entire opening scene was added later as the betas felt it needed a tad more. I agreed enough to add the scene.

This chapter is fairly straight forward. Mostly fluffy filler. But I had to get to the finals one way or another. Next up is the culmination of the quidditch tournament and final bits of preparation for the final task.

My other story, tentatively titled 'The Quidditch World Cup' (which is terrible, but I've come up with nothing better, except perhaps 'Beginnings, Middles, and Ends' which seems long) focuses on Harry looking back over his life since the end of the war, and weighing the decisions he made. It will be Harry/Luna, but that likely won't develop fully until the middle of the story. Anyway, check it out if you like. I may work on chapter two of that before chapter seventeen of this. But, then again, part of me simply wants to finish this and move on. So we'll see how that goes. My goal is to finish this by May, but we'll see.

Regardless, thanks for the reviews. I appreciate all of them. As always, the best way to contact me is likely a PM. I'm always willing

to answer questions as long as they're not spoilers. Thanks again for the reviews and support!

Chapter 17

The Finals

Barty Crouch hated posing as Professor Moody. It was painful, both physically and mentally. He hated the stupid eye, it gave him a headache more often than not, and really just made it seem like the world was constantly spinning. But he'd promised the Dark Lord that he would complete his mission, and he was so very close.

Still, when he'd accepted the assignment, he hadn't expected Potter to do so well by himself. The boy was even flourishing in class, even Crouch, with no actual teaching experience, could see that. And he didn't even appear to put forth any effort. It was frustrating for Barty to watch. He remembered studying the same material for hours in his fourth year.

He was thankful, too, that Dumbledore had given him an incredibly long leash. Of course, Dumbledore had planned the curriculum himself, which Crouch was incredibly thankful for. Apparently that had been one of the selling points to get the real Moody to come teach. It had been helpful, almost as helpful as the fact that Dumbledore had only come to watch the lessons a couple of times, and both times had been with the younger students on material that was very difficult to screw up.

Really, he was amazed the charade had worked. But he wasn't going to complain. The plan was almost completed. He just needed to get the Portkey onto the cup and make sure Potter was the first champion to touch it.

He'd thought that would be the most challenging part of his mission, but Potter had proved to be more than capable. Crouch was tempted to see how well the boy would do on his own. He'd keep an eye on him, that's for sure, but he was strangely less concerned about the boy's safety. He'd seen firsthand that Harry Potter could take care of himself.

Crouch had watched Harry improve as he practiced with the French tart as well. He'd have to tell the Dark Lord about the budding relationship. Surely, there had to be a way they could use that against the young wizard. The Dark Lord would know just how to exploit that weakness. Hopefully, Barty could be useful there as well.

"Crouch?" A voice said from his fireplace. Barty spun Moody's lumbering body toward it.

"Yes Wormtail?" he said. That was another thing he hated. Talking in an imposter's body just sounded completely off. At least this dose of Polyjuice should be wearing off very soon. He sat down by the fire, taking out the fake leg and placing it on the table as he did. Wormtail flinched away from Alastor Moody's body before speaking.

"It's amazing how disorienting that is," Wormtail said. "Every time I think you're really Moody and that Dumbledore knows the entire plan."

"Consider us lucky he does not," Crouch said. He could feel his leg growing back, the first sign the potion was wearing off, so he took out the fake eye. He'd made the mistake of leaving it in as he changed back ones. That was not something he wished to do again.

"Yes. I do. Anyway, our master would like his usual report," Wormtail spoke carefully. Crouch knew that the Dark Lord was near him. But that didn't prevent Wormtail from adding on to his statement. "He's here with me, so he can hear everything you say.

"Things are moving along nicely. Our main plan is going off flawlessly. I have no doubt I will be able to make sure that Potter wins the final task, and the tournament. Frankly, I'm not sure he'll need much help. The boy is becoming quite skilled," Crouch said to the fireplace. He could feel his face changing back to normal as he spoke, and he could hear his voice changing. It took Wormtail a moment to respond. Obviously he was acting as nothing more than the Dark Lord's mouthpiece.

"Are you insinuating the boy may pose a threat?" Wormtail asked. Crouch chose to respond as if it were actually Wormtail asking the questions.

"To you, Wormtail? Maybe if you dueled. But he'll be dazed, confused, and alone. If you can't stun him and bind him when he shows up, well you should have probably really blown yourself up incriminating Black," Crouch said dryly. His voice still sounded off. He knew he was fully back in his own body now, but it didn't matter. After you hear one voice all day, thinking about how it sounds wrong,

your real voice starts to sound wrong as well. Wormtail's annoyed look made the jibe all the more perfect.

"So the boy will not present a challenge?" Wormtail asked.

"He shouldn't," Crouch said.

"Shouldn't is not won't," Wormtail responded, smirking a little to indicate that he appreciated the Dark Lord's comments. Crouch rolled his eyes.

"Like I said. He'll be exhausted and confused. Just be in the proper position and hit him as soon as he shows up and everything will go flawlessly." Granted, Crouch wouldn't put screwing up such a simple task past Wormtail.

"That is good to know. Is there any change in our special concerns at the school?" Wormtail asked.

"No. I am not certain if it is worth the chance at my cover to approach either of them. Karkaroff and Snape have spent a great deal of time with each other. And Karkaroff is very jittery around me, when he thinks I'm Moody. If the Dark Lord wishes I will gladly approach them more candidly," Crouch explained.

"That won't be necessary. We will focus more on the plan. Is your mark returning as quickly as mine?" Wormtail asked.

"Well, given that I haven't seen your arm, I have no idea. But my mark is coming back very quickly. I can only assume Snape and Karkaroff have noticed theirs as well," Crouch responded.

"That seems likely," Wormtail said. "Hopefully they understand just what the Dark Lord will do to them upon his return. He fears he's lost both of them forever."

"Probably. How is the plan progressing on your end?" Crouch asked.

"We are prepared. It's just a matter of waiting for the task now," Wormtail said. He paused for a bit and looked away from the fire as he received his next set of instructions from the Dark Lord. "The article about Potter and Delacour that Skeeter published. Is there anything there?"

"I think so. It's hard to tell for sure. They've certainly started to spend a great deal of time together. It would be a significant blow to him if something were to happen to her."

"That could be useful. But for now, we should probably avoid it if need be."

"Why, if it is not out of place for me to ask, My Lord?"

"It is out of place for you to ask. But unless she wins the tournament, in which case she will have to die, although you've assured me that won't happen. It is likely better to not anger the French too soon. I cannot see something happening to their champion being a boon to us."

"That sounds wise," Crouch admitted.

"I know. Now, is there anything else about Potter you can tell us?" Wormtail asked.

"Nothing that I haven't already reported on," Crouch replied. He paused for a moment before deciding to reiterate his old reports. "He has a much more diverse group of friends than Wormtail said. Most of them do seem to be new friends, though. He also spends a great deal of time with Viktor Krum, as the media has played up. Of course, he is also often in the company of the elder Greengrass girl."

"We may be able to use that," Wormtail responded for the Dark Lord. "But provided you do not fail, Crouch, Harry Potter will be dead shortly after the third task. Keep performing, Barty, and you will be rewarded."

"Thank you, my lord," Crouch replied as Wormtail's head disappeared from the fireplace. Crouch simply sat and stared at the fire for a few minutes before deciding to check on what should be his last batch of Polyjuice.

Albus Dumbledore led the shaggy black dog to his office. Some of the students paused and looked at the dog. A few of the braver ones even approached and attempted to play with the animal. It fully acted the part. None of the students questioned where the Headmaster had found the dog.

"Albus, why do you have a dog?" Minerva asked. Of course his deputy wasn't a student, and liked to know everything.

"Snuffles here was brought by one of the foreign politicians. He didn't have a single place to put him, so naturally I offered the use of my office." Albus said. Minerva's expression hardened at the use of the code word. She still wasn't convinced of Sirius Black's innocence, but the call was not hers to make.

"I see," Minerva responded. "Well I hope he doesn't destroy your office." The Transfiguration professor walked off after she spoke, not sparing the dog a second glance. Albus quietly said the password to the gargoyle guardian and led the dog up into his office. He sat at the large chair at his desk. Sirius transformed back, quickly throwing a robe on, and sat across from him.

"I still do not think this is the wisest decision we could make," Albus said carefully.

"I don't care. Harry is in no immediate danger. He'll be just as safe with me as he would be at his relatives," Sirius argued.

"That is unlikely," Dumbledore spoke slowly, gently resting his arms on the chair.

"Please, safer with Muggles? That's a joke." Sirius said.

"I would agree," Dumbledore said. "But there's ancient magic protecting him when he is with his relatives. It's one of the only reasons that I did not take him in myself."

"You considered that?" Sirius asked.

"Of course I did. But I didn't know what was going to happen. I figured I would be the primary target of renegade Death Eaters and assumed it was best if I didn't make the boy more of a target," Dumbledore explained. Sirius didn't respond for a moment, before simply shaking his head.

"If only I'd have just taken him from Hagrid," Sirius said.

"If only," Dumbledore responded. "I'd have had to come find you then. I thought you were the Secret-Keeper and the spy."

"Yes. But I hope you'd have given me more of a chance than Crouch," Sirius commented.

"I'd like to think so," Dumbledore said. He reached over and pulled out a stack of files, which he placed onto the desk. "That should be everything you need."

"So you're going to let me do this?" Sirius asked.

"There's little I can do about it. The will states you're the legal guardian. And while we do know Peter is out there somewhere, it doesn't seem that Harry is in any immediate danger. And if we do manage to clear your name, you would easily be able to make that claim with the Goblins," Dumbledore said, pushing the files across the desk toward Sirius. The younger man picked them up from the desk and started to look through them.

"How is that going, by the way?" Sirius asked.

"Slowly. Fudge has no interest in opening the case. He feels it will just reflect poorly on him. Especially since he hasn't caught you yet," Dumbledore admitted.

"Poor fool, it would only reflect badly on Crouch, and he's been sick for months," Sirius responded as he paged through the documents.

"That is the line I have been trying to use. It isn't working out very well. But I will get him soon enough," Dumbledore said. Sirius nodded, focusing more of his attention on the papers in his hands.

"So they really did leave him with the Dursley's. I half thought you just stuffed him there as they were a living relation," Sirius said.

"No. Lily was adamant and James believed her. She loved her sister, and she thought her sister loved her. She would have cared for Petunia's son as if he was her own, and she expected that from her sister." Dumbledore explained.

"I'm not even sure James ever met Petunia or Vernon," Sirius admitted. "But Lily always did only see the good in people."

"That she did. It was one of her finest qualities," Dumbledore stated.

"It really was," Sirius said. "How bad was it?" Dumbledore knew what Sirius was referring to.

"Worse than I imagined. Arabella did not see him much when he was young. She said he looked thin, but she didn't notice much more than that. It is probably my greatest failing that I didn't check up on him," Dumbledore admitted.

"Greater than letting Grindelwald stomp around Europe?" Sirius asked offhandedly. He was too busy reading the documents to notice Dumbledore's cold glare. The room was silent for a few moments before Sirius spoke again.

"Clever bit with the money. You wouldn't believe what they got me for when I was in prison. You know, in Muggle banks your money accumulates interest. In Gringotts, they charge you for storage on idle accounts," Sirius said, flipping to the next page.

"It was the very least I could do," Dumbledore said.

"So you really are okay with this?" Sirius said.

"Yes. Barring some drastic unforeseen circumstance it will be better for Harry," Dumbledore said.

"Thank you, Albus," Sirius said. "I'll take great care of him."

"I'm counting on that. Harry could be crucially important. But we will discuss that over the summer."

"You keep bringing that up. It would be easier to just tell me," Sirius said, putting the documents down on the desk.

"It would. But it may not matter. We shall see. Just do me a favor during the final match and task?" Dumbledore asked, leaning forward and placing his elbows on the desk.

"What's that?" Sirius asked, leaning back and lounging himself over the chair.

"Be inconspicuous. It won't help if anyone notices a strange dog milling around," Dumbledore ordered.

"I know. I'll be perfectly hidden. I'm not going to miss a chance to watch Harry beat the other schools into submission," Sirius said.

"Good. While you're at it. Keep an eye on Alastor, would you?"

"Moody? Why? Isn't he one of your closest friends?" Sirius asked.

"Ah. No. Alastor and I disagree on nearly everything. A classic case of the enemy of my enemy. We get along well enough, but it was always war related."

"And you expect him of something?"

"No. But something feels off. Just keep an eye out, it never hurts," Dumbledore said.

"Will do. But if you excuse me. I'm going to head down to the pitch," Sirius said and stood. Dumbledore did the same.

"I'll walk with you, I'm needed down there as well."

Harry Potter pulled himself out of bed later than he would have liked. But he figured the extra sleep would be beneficial in the grand scheme of things. At least it should be better than running and wearing himself out before the match.

He dressed rather quickly, just throwing on some lightweight clothing, knowing full well that he'd be changing into his uniform shortly anyway.

He stood in the warm sunlight that came through one of the windows of the dorm for a few moments and simply looked out over the grounds. Harry could already tell it was going to be a beautiful day. The team was as ready as they would ever be. Alicia had been cleared to play a few weeks earlier, and they felt more confident than they had all year. The usual pre-match jitters were there, but they were far less than normal. Really, he was just excited. More excited than he'd ever been before a match. And, he knew, far more excited than he would be before the final task, he knew.

After another moment of surveying the grounds he decided he better head down to breakfast. If he were any later the team would probably worry that he wasn't going to show up. There wasn't anyone in the common room, and there were very few students in the halls on the way to the Great Hall.

Every single student appeared to be inside the Great Hall, most of them attempting to crowd around the Ravenclaw table. Harry noticed just about every member of the team sat near the middle of it, surrounded by quite a few of their closest friends. He was quite happy to see that Fleur sat close to Lilly. Madame Maxime had eased on her punishment a few weeks back, but he still rarely saw her in the castle. Harry moved quickly toward the table, many students reached out and offered him some support as he walked past.

Harry sat near the end of the team members at the table, between Lilly and Fleur. He gave them each a quick hello as he reached to grab some food. He noticed Fleur wore her usual Beauxbaton's uniform, but she also had one of Lilly's ties hanging loosely around her neck. Of course, from afar, the Ravenclaw colors matched the Beauxbatons uniform enough that it was hard to tell.

His play for food was interrupted, though, by a random voice from the crowd.

"Kiss her already, Potter!" someone yelled. Fleur blushed and looked around, but Harry just laughed and kissed her to much cheering from the crowd. She playfully pushed him away after a moment to some more cheers from the crowd.

"That'd be a nice breakfast," Harry said.

"Oui. But it would drain your energy, rather than restore it," Fleur teased. Harry had to concede she had a point there.

"That may be true," he admitted, reaching for the toast and some bacon. They'd grown closer. She even had him almost capable of forming coherent French sentences. But he was still rubbish at actually attempting to have a full conversation. Fleur had threatened to stop kissing him if he couldn't improve before he had to speak with her parents. Frankly, that wasn't something he wanted.

He ate quietly as the crowd around the table grew. Fleet showed up a few minutes after him and sat nervously next to Fleur. The keeper gathered up some food as well as he exchanged quick pleasantries with Harry.

Titus arrived last, accompanied by Tracey and Daphne. The trio sat across from Harry at the table. There was another 'kiss her' yelled from the crowd, and Titus obliged before Tracy even really knew what was happening.

Harry couldn't help but notice that Tracey was wearing a Hogwarts practice jersey. She saw Titus's number on the side and could guess where she'd received it. Either way she'd charmed it to be rather form fitting, and Harry figured he'd better not stare at the beater's girlfriend for too long. So instead he looked at Daphne. That didn't help.

Miss Greengrass also managed to find a Hogwarts practice jersey. The seven sewn onto the sleeve gave Harry a pretty good idea of who's it was, too. She'd also shrunk it to fit her form incredibly well. Harry just stared for a moment, secretly hoping that no one noticed. Of course, the quick elbow to the ribs didn't do much to assure him of being unnoticed.

"Good morning, Harry. Fleur," Daphne said, giving Harry a nice full smile. She obviously wasn't the least bit intimidated by her French counterpart. Fleur returned the greeting carefully, but then went back to her conversation with Lily.

"Morning Daphne. Do I want to know where you got that?" he nodded toward the jersey as he spoke.

"Titus stole it from your locker," Daphne said. "He figured you wouldn't be using it much after today. I hope you don't mind."

"I don't," Harry admitted. "You certainly look better in it than I ever could."

"Don't I though?" She stood and spun around a little bit. Harry saw Fleur give her a cold glance out of the corner of his eye and decided, as Daphne sat back down, that it would be best to change the subject.

"I can imagine some of your housemates didn't appreciate it at first glance," Harry said. Daphne just shrugged cutely.

"They were too jealous of Tracy and I to notice just whose jersey I was wearing. Frankly, they're simply all mad they didn't think of it," she said playfully.

"That's probably true. I'm surprised they didn't market those," Harry said, again nodding to the jersey.

"I think they tried, but something to do with the fact that you're all minors and students made it difficult," Daphne explained as she picked up a piece of bacon with her fingers, broke off a piece, and ate it carefully.

"Yes. Zey could 'ave done it without ze names, but ze 'eads of ze schools decided it would be in ze best interest of ze students to not," Fleur explained, drawing an appraising look from Daphne.

"And how would you know that?" the Slytherin girl asked. Her playful tone disappeared in a second. Harry could tell she was actually interested in this topic, if not a bit annoyed that Fleur knew something she didn't.

"My father is a solicitor," Fleur said. "Beauxbatons asked 'im to 'andle ze negotiations at ze start of the tournament. 'E explained it all to me when I asked."

"Your father is a solicitor?" Daphne asked, Harry could see the wheels spinning in her head, but he had no idea what her intentions were.

"I just said zat," Fleur responded rather snottily.

"I want to go into law," Daphne said. Fleur examined her carefully for a few moments before she spoke.

"Good luck. It is a difficult profession," she said haughtily before going back to her conversation with Lilly. Daphne glared at her for a few moments, then gave Harry a look that suggested she would never, ever, be remotely mean to his friends. She pouted for a few seconds, but when Harry didn't seem to care that she was pouting, she perked up very quickly. But the conversations didn't last very

long. However, Fleur leaned toward him, as she saw Daphne and Tracey engaged in conversation with Titus.

"You should 'ave asked me if you wanted someone to wear your jersey," she said. Harry looked over at her.

"The thought hadn't even occurred to me. Apparently Titus took it from my locker and gave it to her," Harry said. Fleur shook her head a little bit.

"Wish I would 'ave thought of zat," she said.

"I have another one in the locker room, if you want it," Harry said. Fleur shook her head.

"Zat is okay. She beat me to it," Fleur admitted. Harry just shrugged a little bit, not quite seeing what the big deal was, but figuring it was better if he didn't press it. It didn't particularly matter then, because breakfast ended soon after when Roger noticed that every member of the Hogwarts team had finished eating.

"Alright. Let's go get ready," the captain said, standing up once he finished speaking. The rest of the team stood, along with some of the friends, and moved to leave the Great Hall.

They traveled as a very slow procession toward the locker room. The match wasn't for a few hours, but Harry knew the people who weren't playing wouldn't mind waiting in the stands. From the look of it, too, those waiting would have plenty to do. There were nearly as many souvenir stands around the Hogwarts pitch as there had been at the World Cup. Harry could also smell the concessions starting to be prepared. The organizers certainly had gone all out for the finals.

Harry noticed some of his teammates stared at the pitch in awe as they moved toward the locker room. Conversations started up around him about the amount of pomp for the match.

"Wow," was all Daphne said as she first saw it.

"Yea," Harry responded. "They've gone all out."

"Yes, it looks like they've even expanded the stands a bit. I wonder how many people they expect." Daphne appeared to be right. Harry

noticed the grandstands did seem to be much larger than normal. They were also decorated partially in Hogwarts colors, and partially in Durmstrang colors.

"A lot," Harry responded dryly. "I mean, three schools, family members, ministry officials from all over. It's going to be crazy."

"Nervous," Fleur asked, seeming intent on interrupting Daphne.

"Naturally," Harry admitted. "But about playing against Viktor, not about however large the crowd will be."

"Zat is probably smart," Fleur said. "I'm sure you will do your best." Harry could tell Fleur was simply trying to be supportive. But it didn't help that he was worried that his best wouldn't be good enough.

"I'm sure you'll win," Daphne interjected quickly.

"Thanks," Harry responded to both of them. There wasn't much more he could say than that. They kept walking toward the locker room. The procession moved much slower than Harry would have liked. But he knew there was little reason to speed up. There was still plenty of time, and he'd just wind up sitting and twitching in his locker.

It didn't take too much more time for the team to reach their destination. The crowd of friends started to disperse as the team members ducked into the locker room. Harry turned to Fleur and Daphne intending to say something to them, but instead he was pulled into a tight, warm, hug by the Slytherin girl. She placed a soft, friendly kiss on his cheek, although, like before, it was dangerously close to his lips.

"Good luck, Harry," she whispered sultrily into his ear. He felt chills run down his spine as she did. "I'll be cheering for you." She slid her arms off of him and backed up slowly, smirking at him. Harry turned toward Fleur, intending to apologize, but instead he simply found her lips pressed very hard to his, coupled with her tongue sliding into his mouth. She kissed him for what felt like a very long time before she broke off and gave him a very determined stare.

"Go win," she ordered. Harry couldn't help but nod.

"I'll do my best," Harry said before ducking into the locker room. It didn't even occur to him until he was finished changing that he probably shouldn't have left the two alone.

"You know I'm going to win," Daphne said, crossing her arms over her newly acquired Harry Potter jersey and staring at the French girl.

"I did not realize we were in competition," Fleur tried to sound as stuck up as she could.

"Oh please," Daphne said, fighting back a laugh. "You're trying as hard as I am to hook him."

"You are wrong. I am putting forth very little effort. I already, as you say, 'ave 'im 'ooked," Fleur responded.

"For now," Daphne said. "But I'll win. I have a very distinct advantage." The Slytherin girl smirked a tad. Fleur knew she was likely better off just walking away and ignoring her presumed rival, but she had to admit, she was curious.

"And why do you believe zat?" Fleur asked, trying to give the younger girl the most condescending stare she could manage.

"Because I have three years," Daphne said. "Three glorious years where all you'll be able to do is write letters and see him on weekends. Three years where you'll be focused on your life and your career where all I have to do is charm him over a long period of time. With how much trouble he gets himself into, it will be easy."

"Good luck with zat." Fleur smiled politely. "I believe you will find it more difficult zan you expect."

"Oh no. It will be so very easy. He manages to wind up alone and secluded every year for some reason or another. I'll make sure that I'm the only one who he can trust. I'll do everything to make sure he comes to me with all of his problems. That I'm the only one he can actually trust," Daphne explained, her smirk widening as she spoke.

"I doubt he will confide in you before me," Fleur said, crossing her arms and attempting to make the younger girl feel small.

"Oh I'm sure he won't at first. But you'll have to find time to floo, or write, or at best come to Hogsmeade on a weekend. Eventually, he'll have something that he needs to give his attention to much sooner than that," Daphne said. Fleur could already tell where this was going, and she didn't think it was going to be nearly as effective as the girl did.

"Oh, and he'll confide in you before his two closest friends?" Fleur asked.

"Weasley is an idiot and Granger is a pretentious know-it-all that practically wants to mother him. He's more independent than that. He'll want advice on what he should do without simply being told to do something. He'll get sick of Granger soon enough. There are times where I can tell he already is. I'm the next best option."

"So you'll become his friend? That's very threatening, Daphne. You're going to have to try much harder than that," Fleur said.

"Yes. But then there will be one night, when you haven't heard from him in a few weeks, and have been wondering if he ever solved that problem he had. You'll get up out of bed, Fleur, and start to write him a letter asking.

"A nice gesture, to be sure, but while you're doing that, I'll be helping him with that very problem. And on one such night, when you're wonderfully out of the picture, I'll press my soft lips to his, and plop myself onto his lap and just keep kissing him. One thing will lead to another, and Mr. Potter will forget about Miss Delacour.

"The next time you see him, he'll seem distant, and confused. And it will only get worse from there. He'll be mine. And frankly, that's all it will take. It will take time, but it will be so very easy," Daphne finished with a sinister smirk. Fleur just crossed her arms and gazed condescendingly at the girl. Doing her best to seem like she was unaffected by the girl's words. But she knew that Daphne had a valid point. And a very valid plan of attack.

"Well, Miss Greengrass," Fleur said, hoping that was the girl's last name. "We shall see. Now if you excuse me. I have a quidditch match to go watch. Enjoy your girlish fantasies." Fleur walked straight past Daphne. The Slytherin didn't respond but rather just

watched her go. Daphne knew full well that she'd rattled the girl's confidence.

The Hogwarts quidditch team could hear the loud cheers from the crowd inside their locker room. The noise vibrated the walls. They waited for the start of the match. Doing anything they could think of to occupy themselves. Harry, Roger, and Lilly went over last minute signals and plays that may be called during the course of the match. Fleet sat in his locker, visualizing the quaffle coming at him, thinking of how he would need to move to make the save. Fred and George sat on one of the couches with Alicia, none of them saying anything. They all thought about winning. They all wanted to win this match, and by extension, this tournament, more than any quidditch related thing they'd ever done.

Eventually, they lined up and carried their brooms out to the pitch. The crowd really was staggering. Harry was amazed at the amount of people that filled the stands. They planned to wait for the team announcements before flying over the nearest set of hoops and cycling around the pitch as one cohesive unit. Judging from the fact that the Durmstrang team was already circling lazily around the pitch, they'd likely already been introduced. Harry ran over the Durmstrang roster quickly in his head. Kubica in the hoops, Strauss and Bathory as beaters, Petrov, Nadasdy and Ivanova as the chasers, and naturally, Krum as the seeker.

It took Harry a moment to realize that Bagman was actually announcing something, he could just barely hear him over the roar of the crowd.

"This sounds like it," Roger said as he mounted his broom. Harry focused on the dim, yet amplified, voice of Ludo Bagman. He could barely make out what the announcer said.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen! I give you the Hogwarts quidditch team. We have Fleet, Weasley, Weasley, Spinnet, Davies, Seshion, and Potter!" The starters took off in formation and flew into the stadium to an even louder roar from the crowd.

"You may remember Spinnet missed the last match with a concussion. She's fully recovered and has been cleared to play by both Madam Pomfrey and two independent medical officials." Harry tuned out Bagman for a few moments as he flew around the pitch.

The inside looked quite different than the outside. The school colors were gone, instead replaced by numerous advertisements, at the forefront were the broom sponsors, but just about every magical company Harry could think of had bought at least one ad panel.

He flew around a little bit simply because he enjoyed flying. He picked out some people he knew in the stands as he flew around. He saw that Fleur sat between a group of Beauxbatons students and Hermione. Hermione chatted with the French girl. Ron simply stared at her in awe. Daphne sat with Tracey and the rest of the Slytherin fourth years a few rows away. Draco was the only one in the bunch wearing a Durmstrang jersey. He spun his broom back around as he reached the opposing hoops. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a shaggy black dog gazing up at the action from near Hagrid's hut.

He banked back around and looked toward the center of the pitch as Krum and Davies landed near the center of the pitch and shook hands, both captains smiling rather widely as their pictures were snapped during the ceremony. After that a referee quickly explained the ground rules and then floated up toward the middle of the pitch with the quaffle. Harry moved himself over between the Weasley twins, mirroring how he knew Krum would start the match. He looked at the official and waited, tensely, for it to begin. The crowd even quieted down as the action started.

"It looks like they're ready to start. And they are! Nadasdy wins the draw from Sesion. He passes it over to Petrov. Petrov dodges a bludger from Fred Weasley, and passes it across the pitch to Ivanova. She weaves past Spinnet, fakes a shot and quickly feeds Nadasdy who shoots! Saved by Fleet! And with that, Ladies and Gentlemen, the final quidditch match of the Triwizard Tournament is underway!

"Sesion passes it to Davies as Hogwarts begins their first rush. Davies weaves through Petrov and Ivanova. He dodges a bludger from Strauss. Wait no, it clipped him. He dropped the quaffle. Sesion goes for it! No, she collides with Petrov. Spinnet recovers the quaffle for Hogwarts though. She fakes out Kubica and scores! 10-0 home team!" Bagman's voice was quickly muffled by cheers from the crowd. The cheers subsided as the Durmstrang team entered the Hogwarts zone.

"Petrov back to Ivanova. Ivanova across to Nadasdy, then back to Petrov. Over to Nadasdy again. A bit of fancy passing from the Durmstrang. No doubt they're trying to slow the game down after how the Hogwarts chasers dominated them the last time these two teams met. Petrov has the quaffle. Sesion tries for the steal, no, that just caught her out of position. Ivanova is open! Saved again by Fleet! But Petrov gets the rebound and it's a tie game!

"Sesion on the inbound. She botches the pass to Davies. Nadasdy picks it up and shoots! Fleet with the save once more. He appears to be yelling at Sesion now after that bad inbounds. She takes the quaffle from him and hurls it to Spinnet. Spinnet races down past Ivanova. She dodges a bludger from Bathory and hits Davies with a quick pass. Davies shoots! Saved by Kubica. Sesion on the rebound, saved again by Kubica.

"Petrov has it now. He races down toward the Hogwarts zone. Dodges a bludger from George Weasley and passes it to Ivanova. She gets it over to Nadasdy. He takes a shot and scores low side right hoop! 20-10 Durmstrang." Harry cursed a bit under his breath. He had been in position to cut through that play, and maybe create a bit of a distraction, but he hadn't acted on it, figuring the chasers would make it back quicker.

He turned the Lotus quickly and sped off down the other side of the pitch, joining the rush with the chasers as he did, although he still kept his eyes peeled for the snitch. He pulled up dangerously close to one of the Durmstrang chasers, intent on taking that player, Petrov he thought, out of the play. It worked as Spinnet scored easily, evening up the score once again.

Harry took a moment to look for Krum. The Bulgarian seeker was floating high above the middle of the pitch, doing his absolute best to be unnoticed. Harry flew up near a semi-idle Fred Weasley. Harry recognized the strategy he was using. Krum called it 'the vulture.' If the opposing seeker didn't tail him, he'd spend most of his time surveying the entire pitch, relying on his exceptional eyesight to find the golden ball.

"Knock something at Krum every once and a while. Don't just let him sit up there," Harry ordered. Fred nodded and Harry did see the next bludger that came near him was wacked directly at Krum. The

Bulgarian barely noticed it in time. But he did manage to avoid it nonetheless.

Harry kept flying around looking for the snitch then. He barely registered the chasers as he sped around the pitch. He banked hard behind the Durmstrang hoops, distracting Kubica for a moment, but the Hogwarts chasers weren't in possession of the quaffle at the time, so it was largely a superfluous move. He banked back through the right hoop, again distracting Kubica a bit, and sped off down the pitch. He saw Fleet block a shot from one of the Durmstrang chasers. Davies took the inbound from the Keeper and passed it over toward Spinnet. Harry dove under the Hogwarts chasers and cut straight up after she passed, shooting through the returning Durmstrang players. He cut back in time to see Davies score, followed by a bludger coming directly for him. Obviously Krum didn't like the fact that he told Fred to start focusing on him.

He moved away from the bludger, leading it back toward one of the Weasley twins. One of them parlayed the iron ball toward a Durmstrang chaser. Harry lifted up and floated near the Hogwarts hoops as he scanned the pitch for the snitch. He knew finding it first would be of crucial importance. Of course, he hadn't expected the Durmstrang chasers to have improved as much.

"And after that goal," Bagman's voice echoed through the pitch, "it is now 50-40 Hogwarts. Kubica gives the inbound to Nadasdy. Bathory places a bludger perfectly between Davies and Seslion. Nadasdy covers the length of the pitch by himself. He dekes around Spinnet but has to dodge a bludger from Fred Weasley before he can get the shot off. He tries a wrap around, but Fleet has him covered.

"Nadasdy clears it over the hoops. Ivanova catches the quaffle and rifles it at the hoop. Fleet flips around. He got it! What a save moving upside down through the hoops to prevent the quaffle from passing though! That may be the save of the tournament, folks! Ivanova was completely alone, Fleet on the other side of the hoops, and he somehow got through in time to catch that quaffle. Very impressive.

"Spinnet has possession now. She's moving up the pitch with Seslion on the opposite wing. Davies swings around and joins them mid rush. Spinnet throws the quaffle across the pitch to Seslion. She quickly passes it to Davies as he crosses into the Durmstrang zone.

He fakes to the right before leaving the quaffle for Spinnet. She cuts around and gets the shot off on Kubica.

"Fairly easy save there for the Durmstrang keeper. He passes it out to Ivanova. She relays it Petrov. No! Sesion cuts in front of it, keeping it in the Durmstrang zone. She banks around and finds Spinnet who takes the shot again! And she scores! 60-40 Hogwarts! Believe it or not ladies and gentlemen, but that is the first two goal lead we've had all night!

"Petrov inbounds to Ivanova. She immediately gives it back to Petrov. The Durmstrang team moves down the right wing here. Lots of quick, short passes now. It appears they're trying to draw the Hogwarts chasers out of position as they defend the rush.

"Lots of slow, back and forth passes here. Nadasdy dodges a bludger and feeds it to Ivanova. She dodges another bludger, hanging onto the quaffle for a moment. Spinnet cuts off her angle, but she counters with a pass back to Petrov. He finds Ivanova again and they score! 60-50 now.

"I have to say, the play of the chasers in this match has been remarkably even. Some of the experts thought the Hogwarts chasers would have another field day in this match, but Durmstrang has come up with a very nice counter. They're not going to let the Hogwarts line decide the game.

"Speaking of the Hogwarts line, Sesion inbounds to Davies, who speeds past Petrov and finds Spinnet down the pitch. She dodges a bludger from Strauss and outmaneuvers Ivanova. She fakes the shot and passes it back to Sesion who shoots! Saved by Kubica, but he allowed a rebound and Davies scores! That's back to a twenty point lead for Hogwarts, 70-50.

"Ivanova with the inbound to Petrov this time, he relays it to Nadasdy," but Harry tuned out the commentary then. He saw a golden flicker out of the corner of his eye, well below him. He turned his broom sharply and started to race toward it well before he could determine if it was indeed the snitch. It looked as promising as any snitch he'd ever seen.

Of course he had no idea where Krum was, but he had the line, and he was hurtling quickly toward it. The little golden ball got bigger and

bigger, his eyes focused on nothing other than it. He saw Krum coming at it from another direction. Harry was closer. He'd either catch it, or be on a much better line for the chase.

The golden ball, as if it sensed their presence, cut away from the two seekers. Harry managed to maneuver the Lotus quickly around to follow it, cutting in front of Krum as he did. He pushed the broom as quickly as he could, hoping to put as much distance between he and Krum as he could.

He reached out for the snitch. He'd have it in just a moment. But then his broom just stopped. He, didn't though. He kept going forward for a moment before managing to hook his legs tightly around the end of it. A shrill whistle rang through the stadium. Harry took a moment to recover before looking hurriedly for the snitch. But it was gone. Not that it would have mattered. Play stopped on the whistle.

"And with a blatant foul by Krum, who reached out and grabbed the end of Harry's broom, Hogwarts will take a penalty shot. It's hard to say that was a bad time to take a penalty though. The chaser play has been incredibly even, and Krum certainly wouldn't have beat Potter to the snitch. He prolonged the match with that move. He doesn't care that Hogwarts gets an extra ten as Davies scores easily on the penalty shot. That brings the total to 90-70 after the goals during the chase for the snitch," Bagman kept commentating. Harry couldn't help but glare angrily at the Bulgarian seeker, who largely ignored him.

He turned on his broom, flying away from Krum, mostly because he felt he may try to fly through the Durmstrang captain if he were in too close of proximity for an extended period of time. But then, as he circled around the pitch and noticed that Krum resumed his perch high above the action. He had an idea then.

He resumed flying around as if everything was normal, but after a few moments he cut back quickly across the pitch and went into a very hard dive, nearly directly under Krum. He put himself on such a line that if Krum were to look down, he wouldn't be able to see much more than Harry. Viktor would have to follow him into the dive to make sure Harry wasn't chasing after the snitch.

Harry maintained the dive in such a way that Krum wouldn't be able to do much more than follow him. He pushed his broom as quickly as he could toward the ground. He reached out as if he was going for the snitch once again, but then pulled out of the dive sharply. He heard a rather satisfying thud as he pulled up. He looked over his shoulder to see Krum sprawled on the ground, pulling himself slowly back onto his broom.

"I don't believe it! Potter just executed a perfect Wrongski feint and Krum fell for it. The Durmstrang seeker is pulling himself back onto his broom now. I'm willing to bet that he wishes he hadn't spent so much time helping out Harry in the last few months. That had to hurt!" Harry hoped it did. A lot. He swerved back and kept looking for the snitch.

"After that clever display of flying Spinnet scored another goal, making the score 120-80. It looks like the Hogwarts chasers are finally starting to run up the score a bit.

"Petrov inbounds to Ivanova, who passes it quickly to Nadasdy. He moves it through the center of the pitch himself. Strauss creates some room with an exceptionally well placed bludger. Nadasdy passes it to Petrov as they enter the Hogwarts zone. Petrov tosses the quaffle into the air as he dodges a bludger from George Weasley. Ivanova sweeps in and grabs it, she's undefended now, moves right, quickly cuts back left and fires the shot! Just out of the reach of Fleet. That's 120-90 Hogwarts." Bagman's commentating rang out through the stadium. Harry knew by now that the chasers weren't going to gain an advantage either way.

He lifted himself up over the middle of the pitch and focused hard on every inch of the pitch. Harry scanned every area as quickly as he could. The sun was setting on the horizon, making visibility a bit more difficult. He noticed Krum too was intently focused on the snitch. Both seekers knew the match was in their hands. That they were the great hope for their schools.

Harry saw it then. A golden flash past one of the green Lotus advertisements. He banked quickly and sped off toward it. He could sense Krum did the same thing. They had exactly opposing lines as they raced toward the snitch. It cut directly up over the stands, the two seekers followed it effortlessly. Krum pushed ahead of him in a

straight line, but Harry caught up quickly every time the snitch cornered.

The two seekers moved neck and neck nearly the entire time. Weaving carefully through other players and bludgers as they chased down the golden ball. Harry cut above Alicia, around Petrov and dove under Roger as he followed the ball. Krum was momentarily held up behind Davies, but Harry knew he was faster in a straight dive.

Harry pushed the broom as much as he could, evening directly behind the snitch. He could feel Krum closing the gap. Krum pushed his broom up along side him as the snitch cut hard to the left. Harry had the inside line and took it very quickly, nearly putting his broom through the quidditch star as he did.

But Krum wasn't phased. He quickly gained he ground back. This time, as they closed, the snitch cut to the right and dove hard, until it was skimming just a few feet above the grass, giving Krum the optimal line to follow. But the Bulgarian chose instead to go wide. He intentionally drifted into Harry, using his larger, bulkier body to push the Hogwarts seeker off track.

Harry rolled over the top of Krum, but lost precious time in doing so. He tried to catch up, but Krum gradually pushed further and further away. He could tell it was over, barring a miracle on the snitch's next move.

Harry anticipated another left turn so he rolled left early, hoping to trap the snitch. He felt a momentary flash of hope as the snitch did indeed bank toward him. He raced forward toward it, he knew he and Krum would get there at the same time. And they did, both reaching for the golden ball as they collided in mid air.

Their brooms went flying and they fell, landing hard on the ground. Harry lay there for a moment, wondering just what had happened. The stadium was silent, even Bagman wasn't commenting. The other players had stopped playing.

Krum rose first. He moved over toward Harry and looked at him, then offered is right hand, which Harry took, allowing the Bulgarian to pull him to his feet. The official landed next to them as Krum shook Harry's hand.

"Best match I have had in my life," Viktor said. Harry's body still ached from the collision and fall, but all he could do was nod and agree.

"Me too," Harry said. The official approached them, intending to check if they were both alright. But Krum just held up his left hand and revealed the golden ball. Harry's heart fell.

"Krum has the snitch after the fall!" Bagman's voice echoed through the arena. "That's 250 to 140 Durmstrang! Durmstrang has won the quidditch final!" Harry didn't feel like his legs were going to support him. He fought off the urge to vomit as Krum clasped him on the shoulder.

"I see you at next World Cup," the Bulgarian said, before he walked away from Harry and picked up his broom to join his teammates celebrating in the sky. Harry found his Lotus nearby on the ground as the Hogwarts team landed near him.

"Shit," Roger said.

"Damn," Fred Weasley replied.

"Yea," Fleet agreed.

"I'm sorry, guys," Harry said, staring at the ground.

"It's not your fault," Roger responded. "Play as a team, win as a team, lose as a team."

"Yep," George Weasley said.

"Let's get back to the locker room. I don't want to watch," Lilly said.

"We have to shake their hands," Roger said, mounting his broom and flying up to congratulate the Durmstrang team. Harry followed, the rest of the team trailed after them.

After congratulating the Durmstrang team, and staying on the pitch for the trophy presentation, the Hogwarts contingent finally made it back to the locker room. They changed out of their uniforms slowly and lingered in the locker room, realizing it may likely be the last

time they used it. At the very least it would be the last time they would use it as a team.

"Going to be strange not coming here," Lilly said, gazing around the locker room.

"Yes it is," Roger said. "Hooch said they're going to build a fourth one so each of the house teams has similar facilities next near."

"That'll be nice," Herbert Fleet responded.

"It should be," Roger responded. He'd finished changing and packed up his things quickly. The captain kept much less stuff in the locker room than the rest of the team. He gazed around when he'd finished with that. "Well. It's been a blast, team. We gave them hell, it's a shame we couldn't win. I look forward to flying with all of you some time in the future." Members of the team muttered in agreement as Roger walked out of the locker room.

The rest of the team lingered a bit longer than that. But eventually, they started to leave. Some packed their things, some didn't, figuring they had a few more days before the end of the term. Most of the teammates said something kind to Harry as they left.

Eventually, he was alone in the locker room, he still hadn't changed out of his uniform. He just sat in the locker, his broom propped next to him. He kept going over the final snitch chase in his head, thinking of ways he could have come out on top. After a few more moments of simply sitting there alone he heard the door open.

"Arry? What are you still doing? I assumed I just didn't see you leave," Fleur said softly from the door. He looked up and smiled weakly at her.

"Just going over the end of the game in my mind, trying to figure out what I should have done," he responded.

"Nothing," Fleur responded. "You flew beautifully." She walked over to the large wooden locker and sat next to him in it.

"I didn't win," Harry said.

"You did not. But zat 'appens in sports. What is ze cliché? You cannot win them all?" Fleur asked.

"That's it. But I still wanted to win," he admitted.

"I know you did. But let's get you out of the uniform and find some dinner," Fleur said, reaching out and pulling the jersey up over his head. He had a thin t-shirt on underneath. Fleur deposited the jersey in the locker behind them and sniffed carefully, before pulling the t-shirt off as well. She gasped.

"What?" Harry asked, feeling slightly self-conscious for a moment. He looked down to see the a large bruise forming on his chest. Presumably from where he collided with Krum.

"How does zat feel?" Fleur asked. She gently traced a finger over it while she asked. Harry winced a little bit at the contact.

"It hurts," he said dumbly. Fleur nodded.

"Well, go take a shower, you need it," Fleur ordered.

"Fine," Harry said, gathering up some clothing to change into when he finished. It didn't occur to him until he was already nearly done that he should have at least teasingly asked her to join him.

When he was finished and changed he stepped back into the locker room. He saw Fleur relaxing on the couch, reading a magazine that someone had left. She got up as he stepped out of the locker room.

"I trust you are famished?" she asked. Harry hadn't eaten since breakfast, and he really was.

"Yea. I am," he said, although he didn't really want to sneak into Hogsmeade and have to deal with the press there, nor did he want to venture back to the Great Hall to be around the other dejected Hogwarts students.

"Why don't we go to ze carriage and have a nice quiet meal?" Fleur asked.

"That sounds perfect," Harry said. Fleur took his hand and led him out of the locker room. Harry glanced back around it briefly as they left. It was funny how the locker room had started to feel like home.

He only vaguely remembered Fleur leading him to the carriage. They were stopped by a couple of random groups of students, who mostly offered Harry consoling words. This time, though, Harry could respond mostly coherently in French.

Fleur simply led him back to her room and sat him on the couch near the small table in the room. She summoned an elf gave it quick orders in French. Harry could pick out some of the food items she listed. He leaned back on the couch, and when Fleur finished ordering she sat next to him. They chatted quietly, about nothing in particular, as they waited for the food. Harry was glad the conversation didn't focus on the quidditch match or the final task.

"What did you order?" Harry asked as the elf popped back in with a covered tray.

"Nothing special," Fleur said. "Just some herb roasted chicken with a summer vegetable assortment," she admitted. Harry thought it smelled like something special. When she lifted the cover off the tray, he thought it looked rather special, too. The French elves certainly took great care of food preparation. The two plates were almost identical and each looked more like art than food.

The pair ate quietly, but rather quickly. They were both very hungry. Fleur ordered a basic dessert when they finished, and they devoured that too, when it arrived. It didn't take long after finishing the meal for Harry to realize just how draining the final match had been. He rested his head on Fleur's shoulder for a moment. He closed his eyes and shifted his face more toward her neck, inhaling her flowery perfume as he did. He couldn't help but trace his lips over her neck very briefly. But after a few minutes she shifted and he lifted his head up.

"You are exhausted," she stated. "Do you want to just go to sleep?"

"Not really," Harry said briefly. He was enjoying her company, despite the fact that they weren't doing much.

"Good," Fleur said, moving closer to him and kissing him very softly. "I do not want to sleep, either." She said. She couldn't help but wonder how much of an affect the young Slytherin's words had on her current actions as she lay Harry down on the couch and crawled on top of him. But she didn't care. She thought of him, and the task that could presumably kill each of them, and she knew what she wanted to do.

She kept kissing him, slowly and carefully. She felt his arms slide around her as he kissed her back. She knew she couldn't make it a perfect day. Krum had already ruined that. She knew she couldn't make the bruise on his chest hurt less. And she knew she couldn't take away the shatteringly empty feeling from coming to the pinnacle and then suffering a heart-breaking loss.

But she also knew she could make him feel much better. She could make him feel loved, valued and cared for. She knew she could make him hers. And, as she kissed him, with her body pressing tightly against his, and that was exactly what she did.

Author's Note: Again, not much to say about this chapter. Interestingly, one of the things I enjoy doing the most is writing the quidditch matches, which are often referenced as 'skipped over' by many readers. They're my favorite part of the story.

Another little caveat on banking. I just can't see the goblins, being constantly referenced as greedy, giving people money while they're storing the money. I get the strangest feeling goblins and interest rates don't compute.

I know many readers don't think the Potter's would have left their son with the Dursley's, and admittedly, that isn't their first choice. But in DH it is implied Petunia and Lily were in contact around Harry's first birthday, and family is family. Good people make mistakes. Lily comes across as a character who often couldn't see the bad in people. She appeared to be forgiving of Snape for quite a long time, and doesn't seem like the type to assume the worst of people. Legally, too, the orphaned child would likely wind up in the care of the next of kin. In this case, the Dursleys. It sucks for Harry, but assuming that Lily knew just how terrible the Dursley's would be seems to be a stretch. Siblings are often jealous of each other. Does that make them terrible people? Usually not.

Daphne is fun to write. She's a devious little bint, ain't she?

As for the match, I really really wanted Harry to win. But I just couldn't do it. The scene I wanted after worked better with a loss. And, if Krum really is that good, Harry shouldn't have a chance. But Harry gave him one hell of a match, and was a nicely timed penalty away from winning. Close, but not quite.

I'm probably going to drop the rating to Teen, but I likely won't do that until the story is completed out of general laziness. I'm not sure its earned the M rating, and I doubt anything in the final task puts it up there. We shall see, though.

Well, two chapters left, next up is the final task. There's two races and a whole bunch of baseball to watch this weekend so I'm hoping to have it posted by Monday. Thanks for your continued support and reviews, I appreciate it all. If you're interested, my other story is live, but I'll likely finish letters before moving on to chapter two there. As always, I'm open to discussions of just about anything in private messages. Once again, thanks for your support.

Chapter 18

The Maze

The next morning, or rather afternoon if he'd bothered to look at a clock, came far too quickly for Harry. He opened his eyes, yawning loudly, and stretched a bit. The bed had that wonderfully flowery smell he'd started to love even more the night before. He rolled onto his side to find Miss Delacour staring at him.

"You slept like a rock," she said. Her hair was down and falling around her face. Harry couldn't help but reach out and run a hand through her soft hair. She wiggled closer to him and kissed him once, softly. It was nice, even though it was completely the opposite of how she'd kissed him the night before.

"I'm sorry," he said when her lips left his. "I hope you haven't been awake for long?"

"Not very," she responded before rolling back on top of him. Harry had to admit, that was something that he could really get used to. "I did some reading, before trying to sleep some more. I was going to wake you. But you were sleeping so soundly I did not."

"Yea well I had a long day. I was tired and you didn't help that last night!" Harry argued. Fleur just laughed.

"You 'elped, you know," she teased, resting her head against his chest. He liked the way her hair felt on his skin.

"I guess I did," Harry responded, trying to sound as hesitant as he could.

"No guessing," she said with a faux seriousness. "You certainly did 'elp!"

"Okay. I helped. It was exhausting," Harry teased. He took a moment to wrap his arms around her slender body. Her flowery perfume again filled his senses. It was duller after sleeping the night away, but still present. After a deep breath he couldn't help but admit, "I love the way you smell," of course, it had sounded better in his head.

"Zat is not usually ze first thing you tell a girl you love, 'Arry," she responded, but her tone was still incredibly playful.

"It did sound better in my head," he admitted, before pressing his face into the mass of hair that resided on top of him. He took another moment to simply enjoy being in proximity with her.

"Well zen I will 'ave to remember to buy more of zis perfume," Fleur teased, her lips tracing gently over his neck as she spoke.

"Yes, you will," Harry responded. He was silent for a minute before he asked. "Well, what do we do today?"

"I do not know," Fleur admitted. "It is our last day before ze final task. Tomorrow will be hectic. I was planning on simply relax and enjoy myself."

"That sounds like a good idea. If I have to read another page of Classical Greek spells I'm going to severely injure someone," Harry admitted.

"I agree," Fleur said. "I will be wanting company this afternoon, too."

"I can think of someone who would be ideal for that," Harry responded. He ran his hands gently up and down her back as he spoke.

"Really? Me too," she responded, pressing her body closer to his.

"Well I hope we have the same person in mind," Harry said. He tightened his hold on her for a moment. He didn't particularly want to get out of bed.

"I am sure zat we do," she said. "But now we should get dressed. I am starving and it appears to be a beautiful day. Let us not squander it more zan we already did." She climbed off of him. Harry spent a moment simply admiring her, he just couldn't resist. Before he too climbed out of bed and prepared for the day.

And so Harry and Fleur passed their final day before the third task. They lunched with some of Fleur's friends, before sneaking off to Hogsmeade for the rest of the afternoon. Thankfully, the few reporters they ran into had finished their stories for tomorrow, and

merely asked them pleasant questions about the tournament. They answered as vaguely as they could. Thankfully, there was no sign of Rita Skeeter.

They found another small restaurant off the beaten path in Hogsmeade and ducked in. It was filled with many sponsors and other officials obviously hanging around for the final task. But Harry and Fleur were quickly given a secluded table to enjoy themselves at. Being a champion certainly had some perks Harry hadn't thought about. A few reporters snapped their picture in the restaurant, but neither of them cared.

"You know, zat Daphne girl you took to ze ball really likes you," Fleur said carefully over dessert. "She 'as a plan to snare you in ze coming years."

"Oh?" Harry asked. "She told you?"

"She did. She's quite confident, too. She believes zat ze time apart will be a great benefit to her," Fleur admitted. "She may 'ave a point, too."

"Maybe," Harry said. "But I rather like you more than Daphne." Harry said. Fleur smiled warmly at him.

"Still, I cannot help but be jealous," Fleur admitted.

"You shouldn't be," Harry said. Of course, deep down he knew that without Fleur's presence, he could very well be sitting at this very same table with Daphne. He forced that thought from his mind.

"I realize zat. But zat does not change ze fact zat I am. What are we going to do after ze school year?" Fleur asked. She stared down at the remnants of the dessert for a moment.

"I don't know. You invited me to France in one of your letters. I'd really love to come," Harry said.

"I did. Zat would be fun. But after zat?"

"I don't know, Fleur. We'll figure it out. There's summer and holidays and breaks. If we want to make it work, we'll make it work," he said. She looked up at him from across the table.

"You are sure you won't go running into ze other girl's arms as soon as I am gone?" Her tone was playful, but Harry could tell she was expressing something she felt was a legitimate concern.

"I'm positive I won't," Harry said firmly.

"Good. Zat would make me rather unhappy."

"Well we wouldn't want that," Harry said as their waitress showed up with the check. He paid without a second thought.

"No. We would not," Fleur said as they left, taking a brief moment to pose for pictures with one of the reporters, who claimed he wanted to frame it and display it on his desk. They were happy to oblige. Harry even joked if he won, he'd sign it for the reporter.

"Well, what should we do now?" Harry asked.

"I think we should walk back to ze castle and enjoy ze night," Fleur said, taking his arm as they walked. He felt quite a lot like a Victorian gentleman as he walked with her on his arm.

"That sounds like fun. It is a bit of a trek, though," Harry said. He'd never done it outside of one of the secret passages in the castle.

"I will be fine. Unless Monsieur Athlete is worried he will not make it. I do not zink I will be able to carry you ze entire way," Fleur teased.

"You're a talented witch. You'd come up with some way to get me back to safety, I'm sure," Harry responded.

"Oui. But I would make sure it was entirely unpleasant for you," she responded.

"No you wouldn't," Harry responded. "You like me too much. You'd be all kind and caring and careful."

"Don't spoil my fun," Fleur teased.

"Alright, alright," Harry said. "I'll let you imagine brutal ways to magic me back to the castle."

"Much better," Fleur said. They simply walked in silence after that. Harry stared up at the stars and enjoyed the warm night. The walk passed rather quickly. Harry spoke again when the castle was finally in sight.

"So, are you ready for tomorrow?" he asked. They hadn't really talked about the task itself in their practice sessions. They'd mostly just read the books and quizzed each other on the information and spells.

"I 'ope so. I am more nervous for zis task than I was for the other two," Fleur said.

"Me too," Harry responded. "It's strange, knowing sort of what it is, but not really having a clue at the same time."

"Yes. I do not like it," Fleur said.

"I don't either. I just hope one of us wins," Harry said.

"Me too," Fleur responded as they crossed through the gates and onto the Hogwarts grounds. "But I am worried. They've emphasized the danger more for zis task than for the previous ones."

"Yes, they have. But I'm sure we'll be fine. We're prepared, at the very least," Harry said. Fleur just nodded and after another moment of silence he spoke again. "Should I walk you back to the carriage then?"

"Are you going to spend the night with me again?" Fleur asked. Harry hadn't thought about it. The second she mentioned it, he knew he would really like to. Especially if the night ended in the same way as the previous one.

"I uhm, I'd like to," Harry said. He knew he was blushing. "But I hadn't thought about it. If you don't want me to, I understand."

"Oh 'Arry," Fleur just laughed. "I do not know if I would be able to fall asleep tonight without you."

"Really?" Harry asked. He found that hard to believe, but it sounded rather nice.

"Really. I am nervous. 'Aving you 'old me through ze night will help," Fleur said.

"That sounds like an excuse to get me into bed with you, Miss Delacour," Harry responded.

"Are you complaining?" Fleur asked. She crossed her arms over her chest and gave him an appraising look.

"Not at all," Harry answered, before faking a yawn. "In fact, I think I'm completely exhausted from our walk. I don't think there is any way I could make it back to Gryffindor tower without fainting. We should probably head to bed straight away."

"Zat is what I thought," Fleur responded. And so they walked back to the Beauxbaton's carriage and ended their day in the place where it had begun.

Fleur had some last minute engagements with Madame Maxime and some French reporters the next morning. Harry didn't accompany her. Instead, he found himself cleaning out his locker in the now nearly abandoned locker room. He folded his uniforms in a sloppy manner, and lumped them into a bag with his pads. He wasn't sure if he'd ever need a Hogwarts jersey again, but it seemed better to keep it rather than throw it away.

When he got all his clothing packed up he tossed the few books he still had in his locker into the bag as well. He took a moment to shrink it for ease of carrying. He did a quick last minute check of his locker before pocketing the shrunken bag and picking up his broom.

The Lotus was an interesting item. He'd grown fond of it since the start of the school year. He vaguely remembered considering giving it to Ron or another member of the Gryffindor team at the end of the year. But he certainly didn't want to do that now. Sure, next year, during the house matches, he'd use his Firebolt without hesitation. But he liked the other broom. He'd think of some use for it.

He propped the Lotus onto his shoulder, like an old soldier carrying a musket, before leaving the locker room. He spared a quick glance toward the Beauxbaton's carriage and wondered if Fleur was done with her interviews. He was tempted to check, but she said she'd come find him when she was free.

He gazed up toward Gryffindor tower. He hadn't been there in nearly two days. By far the longest he'd gone without seeing the common room in his Hogwarts career. He idly wondered if anyone would even notice his absence.

Harry walked back up the path to the castle. He debated simply flying up to the North tower, as it would be a shorter walk from there, but decided against it. Already, despite the early morning hour, the grounds were packed with Hogwarts students anxious to see the final task. Just about everyone he saw gave him a quick smile or a nod too. Harry could also see some of the sponsors magically constructing the maze above the lake.

Once inside the castle people were even more cordial. Every Hogwarts student he saw came up to him and wished him luck on the first task. A few made comments about the quidditch loss to Durmstrang, but they didn't blame him. Mostly they congratulated his flying. A few said it was such a shame he'd obviously walk away with the house cup the next year. Harry hoped they were right.

Because of this, though, it took him quite a bit longer than expected to make it back to the Gryffindor common room. A few of his housemates were lounging around. They immediately dropped whatever they were doing to come and talk to him. They asked about how he felt about the match, where he'd been, and if he was ready for the third task. He answered mostly honestly.

Of course, admitting he'd spent the majority of the last two days, and implying the last two nights, with Fleur just led to more questions he didn't quite feel like answering at the time. But he did his best to leave it ambiguous and eventually they let him go up to his Dorm to put his things away.

That didn't take him long. He carefully stashed his Lotus next to the Firebolt, comparing the two brooms in his head as he did. The Lotus looked a bit more worn. He made a mental note to go over it with his service kit later simply to make sure both brooms stayed in very good condition.

After that, he simply enlarged his books and uniforms in the sack he brought and tossed them, like just about everything else, into his

trunk. He'd think about that later. He was slamming his trunk closed when Ron walked into the dorm.

"There you are!" he exclaimed. "McGonagall sent me to find you. She said the champions get some time with their families before the final task!" Harry did a quick double-take and simply stared at his friend. Did Ron forget that he was an orphan?

"I don't have any family, Ron," Harry said dumbly.

"Oh you git," Ron said. Harry couldn't help but think that was slightly unfair. In his mind, Ron was being the git. "I'm pretty sure mum is here to cheer you on."

"Ah," Harry said. That made sense. "Cool. Thanks Ron, I'll head down there now."

"Good, you do that or McGonagall will skin me. Took me forever to find you. Where have you been the last few days, anyway?" Ron asked.

"With Fleur," Harry responded as he stepped out of the dorm. He didn't bother to wait to see Ron's response. He couldn't help but feel happy that Mrs. Weasley had stepped up to be the parental figure for the day. Although it would have been nice to be able to spend some time with Sirius, but he hadn't seen the shaggy black dog since before the quidditch match.

Of course, he realized as he stepped out of the common room, if this was time for champions and their parents, it meant that Fleur's parents were here, and he wasn't quite sure he was ready for that. He remembered her comments on how both her parents would likely only want to speak French. He started to drill basic conversation pieces in his head as he descended toward the Great Hall.

When McGonagall saw him enter the Great Hall she quickly grabbed him and directed him to one of the side chambers. The Transfiguration professor seemed a tad more frantic than usual. Harry tossed it up to simply having to deal with the preparation for the final task.

Almost as soon as he entered the side chamber he was engulfed in a hug from Mrs. Weasley. It was one of those bear hugs where he

couldn't help but wonder, if only for a moment, if he'd ever draw breath again. When she released him Bill Weasley shook his hand.

"Harry! How are you doing? Keeping everything in order? Ready for the last task?" She asked, sounding suitably concerned.

"Yes. I think so at least. It's hard to tell. Thanks for coming Mrs. Weasley, and you too, Bill," Harry said. He felt a little surprised that they'd show up to watch him, but he wasn't particularly sure why. Still, it was nice to know that they cared.

"Least we could do, Harry," Bill said with a smirk. "And it helps that we get to watch a great show. I have to say, I'm intrigued for the last task. Sounds like it would be fun for me. Not sure if someone your age should be doing it. But you think you're prepared?"

"Yes," Harry said, feeling slightly offended by the age comment. "They gave us some stuff to look over. I'm sure I'll be fine." He took a moment to gaze around the room. Cedric and his parents left the side chamber, presumably to go for a walk. Krum stood in the corner with his family, apparently general surliness of expression ran in the family. Still, they appeared happy to see each other.

His eyes found Fleur last. She was engaged in a rapid conversation with her mother and father. Gabrielle was latched onto her mother's hand, but when she saw Harry, she gave him a quick wave. He couldn't help but grin. He noticed Gabrielle pull on her mother's hand and start to gesture toward him as Bill spoke.

"So you think you're ready?" he asked. "You're one of the favorites to win, you know."

"I better be," Harry said, referring more to his readiness than his being a favorite to win. "I certainly don't have much time left to prepare if I'm not."

"I guess, you just don't seem very nervous," Bill said.

"I'm nervous," Harry commented, but Mrs. Weasley interrupted.

"Oh Bill, don't scare him. It's traumatic enough being forced to compete!" Mrs. Weasley said. "Don't make it even worse."

"Right, sorry," Bill said quietly.

"It's fine," Harry responded. The conversation suddenly seemed tenser than it needed to be, and Harry wasn't particularly sure why. After a moment of slightly awkward silence Bill spoke up again.

"So you and the French champion?" he asked, eyeing Fleur over Harry's shoulder.

"Yea. She's great," Harry said.

"She's a bit old for you, don't you think?" Molly asked. "Wouldn't you like someone closer to your age?"

"No. Fleur's great," Harry said, more sternly. "She's been a phenomenal help, and we complement each other."

"If you're sure," Molly responded, hesitantly.

"I am," Harry responded.

"Good, because it looks like you're going to have to introduce us." Bill nodded over Harry's shoulder as he spoke. Harry turned to see the Delacours approaching. He realized he was more nervous for the ensuing meeting than he was the final task. At least he felt prepared for the last one.

"Excuse me," Fleur said with a polite smile. "I am Fleur, zis is my father, Louis, my mother, Apolline, and my sister, Gabrielle." She gestured to each of the people as she spoke. Her father was rather plain, Harry noticed, but her mother was just as stunning as she was. After a moment she continued. "And zis is 'Arry, I'm sure Gabrielle 'as not stop talking about 'im, and," she paused, gazing up at the Weasleys.

"Uh. I'm Bill, Bill Weasley," Bill said after spending a moment recovering from, well, Fleur being Fleur.

"Molly Weasley," Mrs. Weasley responded after a moment.

"A pleasure," Louis Delacour said. "Are you Harry's guardians? Fleur has told us so much about him." For someone who didn't like to speak English, Harry had to admit, Mr. Delacour's was flawless.

Well, maybe he wouldn't have to embarrass himself attempting to speak French.

"No," Molly admitted. "Merely close friends."

"Well that is nice," Louis said. Fleur slid over and stood next to Harry, gently taking his hand.

"Yes, it is. He's very close with my youngest son. He's told us all about your beautiful daughter too. He's quite flattering of her," Molly lied. But Harry appreciated it nonetheless. Even more so as Fleur gave him a warm smile when Molly said it.

"Ow about a walk?" Fleur asked after a moment. "I 'ave been cramped up inside all day and it is gorgeous out. We can chat on ze grounds?"

"I think that's a good idea," Harry said, although most of the adults didn't seem to think so. But the champions didn't care. They simply started to walk out of the side chamber, and then the school, knowing that everyone else would follow them.

They passed the majority of the afternoon with polite, near meaningless, conversation. The adults wound up far too distracted with each other to really focus on the two champions. Mr. Delacour was rather fascinated with Bill being a Curse Breaker, and appeared to have some knowledge of the craft. At least enough to hold a conversation.

Harry couldn't help but eavesdrop into that chat a bit as the two men discussed tombs Bill had plundered, with Bill telling rather interesting stories of a Mycenaean tomb he'd been privately contracted to raid on his way back from Egypt. From the sound of it, it had simply been one disaster after another, but Bill didn't seem to mind. Really, he made a joke out of the entire event.

Mrs. Weasley and Mrs. Delacour discovered a shared passion for cooking, although Harry could tell they didn't particularly agree on some methods and concepts behind some dishes, and having sampled both some French cuisine and Molly Weasley's cooking, he could tell why there would be disagreements. And it wouldn't be Angelo-French relations if there wasn't some type of disagreement.

Fleur and Harry wound up walking in front of the adults. Which would have been nice if it wasn't for the fact that Gabrielle inserted herself between them and spoke, rather quickly and animatedly, to Harry. Naturally, she only spoke in French. And to make matters worse, she started to get incredibly annoyed with him whenever he was too slow to respond. Fleur was completely useless, too, finding the entire situation far too amusing.

It was rather embarrassing when the eight year old French girl started to correct his grammar. Of course, that just made it even funnier for Fleur.

Eventually, Harry was forced to talk with the adults. Thankfully, though, he was allowed to switch back to English as both the Delacours and the Weasleys asked him questions about the quidditch match. He worried that he'd bore the adults, but they seemed rather interested in his commentary on the match.

They asked things like how it felt to fly against Krum, and what he thought of the penalty Krum took, and how he felt about the match in general. It felt strangely like being interrogated by reporters, but at least it was a tad more friendly. Mr. Delacour even commented that Fleur had talked about how good on a broom he was.

That conversation led into what Harry wanted to do professionally. None of the adults were rather impressed that he didn't know what he wanted to do with his life. They perked up a bit when he implied he may be interested in playing quidditch professionally. Mr. Delacour even implied that he should look into a few of the French League teams.

Soon enough it was Lunch time. Molly and Bill excused themselves stating that they wanted to visit with the rest of their family members over lunch. As they left Apolline turned to Harry and spoke, in French.

"Would you care to join us for lunch, Harry?" Mrs. Delacour asked.

"I'd love to," Harry responded, switching into his hesitant French as well. Still, the quick response earned him a slight smile from Fleur's mother, and that had to be worth something.

And that's how he found himself eating with the Delacours inside the Beauxbaton's carriage. It was mostly pleasant and light, at least until Mr. Delacour asked, in French.

"So what are your intentions towards my daughter, Harry?" The question caught him off guard.

"Well, I don't know. I really like Fleur. I enjoy her company. She's been a great help with preparing for the final task. I really like spending time with her," Harry said. It took him longer to speak than he would have liked, but at least he assumed he got all of the French words right.

"Good answer," Mrs. Delacour responded. "At the very least we can tell you are not charmed."

"I told you, mother," Fleur said hastily. Obviously that was a contested issue with the Delacours.

"Sorry for not believing you, dear, but it took me years of looking to finally find someone who I could be myself around," Apolline said, placing her hand softly on her husband's shoulder.

"You still charmed me from time to time," Louis Delacour admitted with a quick smile.

"I hope I still do," his wife responded warmly. "And I hope Fleur charms Harry on occasion as well."

"She does," Harry admitted with a smile directed at Fleur, who blushed at the compliment.

"Good, she should," Apolline said. "You seem like a nice enough boy. Certainly you aren't very much like that Skeeter woman makes you out to be. Sadly, very few other articles have said much about you, past your performance in the tournament."

"That's not surprising. I don't really give interviews. I dislike talking to reporters, always feel like I'm going to give the answer." Harry admitted.

"But Skeeter has had many quotes from you," Louis commented. That was news to him, except then he remembered the sole article he'd read by her, and how she'd quoted him there.

"She's incredibly good at overhearing things, and quoting them completely out of context, or adding her own context." Harry said. "I actually wonder how she does it," Harry admitted."

"You are not the only one," Fleur commented.

"No. There are many people who wonder the same thing. She thrives off people admitting they said things, all the while having no recollection of her being there. One of her articles managed to debunk one of my cases a few years back," Louis Delacour said.

"That sucks," Harry said, not sure what else he could say on that.

"Indeed it did. But she will get what is coming to her soon enough. She's bordering on libel in most of her articles. One day she will take it too far," Louis responded.

"Day can't come too soon, if you ask me." Harry said.

"I agree. Now, Harry. Lunch has been a pleasure, but I find I haven't seen my daughter since she left for school. If you wouldn't mind? I'm sure you'll be able to monopolize her company later," Louis smiled warmly. Despite his words, he still managed to sound incredibly friendly.

"Of course I should prepare for the tournament anyway. It was a pleasure to meet you and your wife." He gave a quick nod to both of them. "And always a pleasure, Gabrielle," he couldn't resist adding the last bit, which made the smaller girl blush and giggle quite a bit. They returned his farewell as he left the room, and eventually, the carriage.

Harry still had a fair bit of time before he final task began. Still, he figured he'd be best off changing into the mandated champion uniform and simply relaxing until the task began. He started to walk slowly back to the castle when he saw Titus and Tracey walking around the lake. He figured that meant Daphne was somewhere

nearby. And, a few seconds later, she did sort of just appear next to him.

"Hello Harry," she said. "Haven't seen you around lately." She sounded so innocent and friendly. Harry almost felt guilty for spending time with Fleur rather than her. Almost.

"Daphne," he said. "I was eating lunch with Fleur and her parents."

"How did that go?" she asked.

"It was fine. I managed to hold an entire conversation in French!" He figured his tone gave away just how proud of that he was of that fact.

"Impressive," Daphne said. Harry got the feeling she didn't particularly care about whether or not he could hold a conversation in French.

"Thanks," he said. "Do you speak any other languages?"

"Of course," Daphne said. "My parents were rather insistent I receive all the proper manners and fineries. I speak a little French, a little Spanish, play the piano, paint, draw, and am otherwise the perfect lady."

"Really, the perfect lady?" He wasn't sure if she was joking or not. But he assumed she couldn't be serious.

"Couldn't you tell?" Daphne teased. "Or did you just think I was naturally a good dancer and brilliant conversationalist?"

"Caught me," Harry said.

"You just keep underestimating me, don't you?" Daphne said. She moved a bit closer to him as they walked toward the castle.

"I have no expectations, Daphne, as such it's hard to underestimate," he said, taking a step away from her.

"Good, that'll make things easier," Daphne said.

"What?" Harry responded, although he had a pretty good idea what she was talking about.

"Nothing. Tell me, are you prepared for the final task?" she asked.

"That's like tenth time I've been asked that today," Harry chided.

"That doesn't sound like a reassuring answer," Daphne responded playfully.

"I am as prepared as I'll ever be. I'm actually sort of looking forward to it," Harry admitted. "It should be fun. Scary, but fun."

"Well, I will be rooting for you," Daphne said. "I'm probably going to wear your jersey again, too. Just beat Krum this time so Draco finally shuts up."

"For you, Daphne, I'll do my best," Harry responded dryly. They were into the castle by then. Harry could tell that Daphne was going to follow him back to Gryffindor tower, barring something unpleasant.

"I'm sure you will. But I'd rather you did it for yourself," she teased. Harry could tell she was going to start to get ever more flirty then, but the Weasleys picked that moment to round the corner. Molly was chatting animated with Ron and Ginny. At least until she saw Daphne. At that moment her eyes narrowed and she started to approach Harry and Daphne.

"That looks like my cue to leave," Daphne said. She then gave Harry a full hug, wiggling herself close to him. He rather liked whatever made her smell of vanilla. Not quite as much as Fleur's flowery perfume, but he still liked it. She leaned up and whispered into his ear. "Come find me after the task, too. I have a surprise for you." Her lips brushed dangerously close to his ear, before she let him go and quickly scampered down the hallway, away from the Weasleys.

"Who was that, Harry?" Mrs. Weasley asked. Her face was flushed and she looked rather annoyed.

"Daphne Greengrass," Ginny responded for him.

"The girl he took to the ball?" Molly asked.

"Yes," Harry said. "She's nice. Although she can be a bit flirty."

"What did she want?" Molly demanded. Harry could already tell where this conversation was going. And he really didn't want to stick around for it.

"Just to wish me luck," Harry said. "But I really should go and get ready for the task now."

"Oh, yes, you probably should. Good luck, Harry, we'll be rooting for you," Molly said without much emotion. She was too busy watching the Slytherin walk down the hallway. Harry took the momentary distraction to duck behind the Weasleys and make his way back to the Gryffindor common room.

He passed the few hours merely resting on his bed, staring up at the curtains. He drifted in and out of consciousness on occasion, but mostly stayed alert. The other fourth year boys left him alone, letting him do any last minute preparations in peace. Fortunately, he didn't have any. Eventually, he changed into the champions attire, picked up his wand off his bedside table, and left the dorm.

Quite a few of his housemates were still waiting in the common room. They followed him out of the tower. He rather liked the feeling of having an entourage. It reminded him of the extra efforts Wood put into protecting him last year before the quidditch final. Still, he knew it would annoy him if it were to happen on a more consistent basis.

He ignored the followers as he walked out toward the pitch. He could see the gigantic transparent maze floating above the lake. He could already see the cup shining in the center of the maze. And he wanted it. Badly. They'd certainly fashioned that quickly. He saw four distinct paths leading up toward the maze. Each path led out of another gigantic structure. Harry gasped when he saw them.

Surrounding the lake was a gigantic pyramid, a gothic castle, a mosque, and a Greek temple. There were also large floating screens near the stands. Harry imagined they were to ease viewing when the champions were in the first part of the task. He walked up to the staging area near the giant structures. Once again, he was the last champion to arrive. Fleur immediately migrated to his side.

"Alright champions," Bagman said quietly so only the people in the immediate vicinity could hear. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," they said at nearly the same time. Bagman magically amplified his voice before speaking again.

"Ladies and Gentleman! Welcome to the final task in the Triwizard Tournament! By the end of the night, we will know who has been successful in the search for eternal glory! The cup is in the center of the maze. When the first champion touches it, the maze will dissolve, safely lowering the students back to the ground and the task will be complete! The champions will now draw to determine who will overcome which trial!" Bagman held up his hand to show that he held four sticks. Harry noticed all of the floating screens had turned on and were focused on Bagman's hand.

"Mr. Potter and Mr. Diggory are leading in the standings. They will draw first," Harry and Cedric approached Bagman. Harry gestured for Cedric to draw first, the older Hufflepuff nodded. Cedric picked the stick on the far left and pulled it out. He examined it for a moment, there didn't appear to be anything on it. But after a moment, the stick started to transform. It turned into a model matching the mosque. Cedric nodded his understanding.

"And now for Mr. Potter!" Bagman moved his hand over toward Harry. Harry took a deep breath and reached for the stick in the middle. He held it flat in his hand after drawing it out. It shifted into a model of a pyramid. He nodded and Bagman moved on to Krum, who drew the gothic castle, and Fleur, who wound up with the Greek temple.

"Now, the champions will proceed to their selected starting area! On the signal, Mr. Diggory and Mr. Potter will begin. Mr. Krum and Miss Delacour will enter their tasks after a set amount of time has passed.." The champions did start moving off toward their starting zones. Harry's pyramid was the closest to the staging area. When he arrived he glanced out over the stands. The screens focused on him looking around. It was strange to see himself projected. But he liked how calm and put together he looked. It took the other champions a few seconds to approach their own starting points.

"Alright, Ladies and Gentlemen. The quest for eternal glory ends tonight! Mr. Potter and Mr. Diggory you may begin!" the crowd cheered loudly. Harry took a deep breath and walked up to the opening. He paused for a moment before entering. He vaguely

remember reading something about poisons in the tombs. He took one last deep breath of fresh air before casting the bubble head charm onto himself and entering the tomb.

It was very dark. Pitch black to be exact. He cast a quick, weak, Lumos charm as he stepped down a few steps and looked around the chamber. He remembered reading that light was a trigger on some of the ancient Egyptian wards, so he wanted to be particularly careful.

He spent a moment examining the room. He wasn't sure how much time he really had, but he figured he should be careful. There were two unlit torches on each of the side walls. He was hesitant to light them for fear of some type of gas or flammable compound in the air. Although, he did assume they likely wouldn't want to blow up one of the champions. Regardless, he wasn't going to chance it. The room did have a canal through the middle. Which he noticed as he stepped into it and nearly fell over. He examined it carefully, but saw no particular use for it at the moment.

Still he followed it a few feet to the fourth wall the room. There was a small opening at the bottom of the room. He sat down on the cold, dusty floor and tried to peer through the opening.

He couldn't see much in the next room, either. He debated, for a moment, simply trying to crawl through the opening, but without knowing what was in the room, that seemed to be too dangerous. So instead he went back and gazed around the first room again. He could see nothing to do other than light the torches. But he still felt that required ultimate caution. He used the weakest fire spell he could think of on the first torch. When nothing unusual happened he figured it had to be safe enough to light the four torches.

"Incendio," he said quietly, pointing his wand at each of the torches. They lit the room rather nicely. He glanced around. Nothing seemed too out of place after that point. He sat on one of the steps near the door and looked around. His eyes glanced over each of the side walls first. He didn't notice anything unusual there.

His eyes followed the canal through the middle of the room then. He still couldn't see anything through the hole at the bottom of the wall. He simply sat for a moment and debated what to do.

Harry could come up with nothing better than simply getting up and going to peer through the hole again. However, when he stood, he finally noticed his first clue. There was an Egyptian symbol etched on the wall high above the crevice. It took Harry a few minutes of thinking over the connotations in the book he'd received to remember what it stood for. Life.

He paused to think about that. Life. There had been something crucial about that, but he couldn't quite place it. He paced around the chamber, knowing he'd have to think of it. It was annoyingly frustrating because deep down he knew what the symbol was referencing, but it just simply wouldn't come to the front of his thoughts. He walked back to the entrance of the chamber, noticing for the first time that a large stone door now prevented him from leaving. He idly wondered how soon after his entrance it had been before that closed.

Harry sat on the steps again. His eyes traveled up to the symbol on the wall again, before letting his eyes travel down to the elongated dent in the floor. Life. He knew it should be easy, and he knew that he was missing something. But that simply frustrated him more. It didn't matter if it should be easy. He didn't know it.

He took a deep breath to steady himself before looking around the room once more. He was struck by how much like dirt the floor looked, despite being smooth, albeit dusty. Dirt triggered something in his mind, but it didn't fully quick yet.

His eyes shifted to the canal in the center of the room. He noticed the ground there had small etching placed throughout it. The etchings reminded him of waves. Really, the entire thing looked sort of like. Bingo. A river.

He could see the paragraph from the history section of the text in his head. The Nile providing the life of the entire region. The ancient Egyptians praying for a flood so the fields would be fertile. And here he had a dried up river. Easy enough to fix.

"Aguamenti," he said, pointing his wand at the canal. It very slowly started to fill. He simply kept his wand pointed at it. It took a few minutes of completely fill, but once the water started to spill over the sides of the canal, he saw the far wall begin to open.

Harry stood, keeping his wand trained on the canal, and moved toward the wall. When the opening was large enough for him to comfortably step through, he did.

In the next room he noticed the canal disappeared. Yet he still heard rushing water. He saw more unlit torches on the walls and lit them quickly while looking for a sign of the noise. Over in the corner of the room he saw that the water from the canal was obviously rushing under the floor of the room, and pouring into a large well in the corner. It was about half full, with water still rushing into it. He figured it would fill soon enough and gazed around the room once more.

The center was dominated by what appeared to be four very large sarcophagi. There was also a small hole, perhaps a tad larger than a fist, in the far wall with another hieroglyphic above it. He approached and gazed into the hole before deciding to translate the symbol. It only took him a minute to remember it was the one that came after life in the text. The polar opposite of life. Death.

That was slightly concerning. Nothing quite came to mind when he thought of death. Nothing pleasant, at the very least, and nothing that would be particularly helpful. He walked back over toward the well to check on the progress there. It appeared to be full. That had to count for something, he assumed, but now he had to figure out just what.

Thankfully that didn't take very long. In fact, it was only a moment later when he heard a very loud crashing noise. He spun around and saw the tops of the sarcophagi had been pushed off and a mummy was rising out of each of them. Rather quickly too. He'd always pictured mummies as these lumbering, slow, dimwitted things. But the four of these were moving very quickly, and he already tell, were trying to surround him.

He ducked quickly around the first one that approached him. It swiped back and nearly grabbed him, but he slid around it.

"Stupefy," he said, shooting a large red ball of energy at the closest mummy. It was a direct hit. But unfortunately it had no effect. Harry thought that was legitimately disappointing. He moved away from the group of mummies. Circling around the room in a way to keep

his distance, figuring he'd be safer the more distance he kept between them.

"Diffindo." He attempted the cutting curse. It had more of an effect than the stunner, but only slowed up the mummy by a bit. Harry assumed that if he could sever a couple of limbs it may be more effective, but he also assumed that would take too much time. Again, he was forced to dodge one of the mummies.

"Reducto!" he shouted as another mummy got close. He swerved away before he could see the effect of the spell. When he finally felt comfortable enough to swerve and look at the mummies again he noticed there were only three moving, and a large heap of dust on the floor. He figured that would be the most effective spell choice for now.

He quickly dropped another one with the Reductor Curse. This time he noticed the large hole it created in the creatures chest. The injured mummy fell to the ground and started to turn to dust.

By then the other two seemed to have figured out his strategy as well. They ran at him very quickly. He got one curse off before he had to duck out of the way. Harry used his speed to create a little bit of distance before spinning around and destroying the remaining two mummies rather quickly.

But nothing happened. He gazed around the second chamber, waiting for some other type of clue, figuring he'd bested that challenge. But apparently he hadn't as there still wasn't any indication of where he needed to go.

Harry walked over toward the small hole in the wall and examined it carefully. He didn't want to simply put his hand in, figuring that would end poorly. He took a moment to look around the room, trying to find anything he could use.

His best option appeared to be the sarcophagus tops. He walked over to one and shrank it quickly, before transfiguring it into a makeshift fist, simply because that was what he thought looked like it would fit best into the hole. He magically levitated it toward him, before placing it into the opening.

There was a very loud, metallic noise, but nothing else happened. He pulled the stone fist back out and noticed many little nicks around it. Some that cut rather deep into the rock. He was glad he hadn't stuck his hand in. He disregarded the rock and examined the hole closely.

Except something felt off. A slight shiver went down his spine and he reacted purely on instinct as he dove to the side. He could feel something rip through the Bubble Head charm. It popped as he rolled away, rising to his feet as quickly as he could. He could still breathe, though, so he figured they hadn't poisoned the chambers. His four mummy friends were back.

Harry dropped one with a quick Reducto. It melted into dirt almost as soon as he hit it with the curse. But that gave him an idea. He dodged away from the second flailing mummy before destroying it as well. He turned to the third one and conjured ropes around it before dodging out of the way. He planned on finishing off the final mummy then, but he noticed the one he'd bound turned to dust when it fell to the ground.

He delayed on taking out the last zombie then, recalling something from the Egyptian book. What was it? Something about how they'd tried to be masters of death. Oh yes. The ancient Egyptians felt they could control the dead. They had a spell that allowed them to control the corpses of people. It was borderline illegal, and served as the basis for the Imperius curse. But since it only worked on dead creatures, it wasn't considered Unforgivable. Fleur had wanted to attempt it. But he lacked the needed dead creature to pull it off.

Still, Harry found it slightly odd they'd build a task around that spell. Of course, it was the last thing he'd expected. So it had the element of surprise. He put a good deal of distance between himself and the mummy before taking a deep breath, leveling his wand, and muttering the incantation.

The effect was immediate. The mummy stood stiffly and stopped moving. Harry paused for a moment. He realized he didn't know how to control it, but he could sense it was waiting for an order. Harry moved his wand toward the hole in the wall. The mummy didn't move. Harry crossed his arms and pondered for a moment. It had been easy. Could it be as simply as a verbal order.

"Come here?" he half-asked half ordered. The mummy looked at him, but simply tilted its head to the side like a confused puppy. Harry assumed it didn't understand him. That would figure. He tried in French, just for kicks. He didn't expect it to work, and it didn't.

He reverted to hand signals next. He pointed at the mummy, then back to himself and waved his arms in a 'come here' fashion. It took the mummy a moment, but it approached him. Harry led it over to the hole in the wall. Thankfully, it followed.

Next he pointed to the mummy's hand, then pointed to the hole. It took a couple of tries, but eventually the mummy lifted its hand and placed it in the hole. It shrieked and fell to the floor as the hole clamped around its hand. The mummy burst into dust as well, but not before revealing another hidden door into what Harry could only assume was the final room of his challenge.

It was the smallest of the three chambers. It had an open door that Harry could see lead outside and up. Next to the door were two already lit torches. Unfortunately, between those two lit torches sat a sphinx.

"Erm, I don't suppose you'll just move and let me by?" he asked.

"No," she responded. "You must answer my riddle. If you answer wrong, you will have to fight me to pass." Harry stared at her. He had to admit, she was fairly attractive for a non-human creature. Of course, that thought kind of disturbed him.

"Pleasant," Harry responded dryly. "Well. Whenever you're ready." The sphinx looked at him for a moment before she spoke.

"You must tell me what can make us laugh, and make us cry. What can bring back the dead and keep us young. What is born in an instant and lasts for all time. And what's all that's left from my once proud time," she spoke slowly, making sure Harry heard every part. He paused and waited for a moment, letting the words soak in. After a few seconds of awkward silence he asked.

"Uh. Am I allowed to ask you to repeat it?" He hoped that wouldn't lead to an incorrect answer and an impromptu mauling by a sphinx.

"Of course," the sphinx responded before repeating the riddle.

Harry simply stood, shifting his weight back and forth. He focused on the start of the riddle. What makes us laugh and makes us cry? Many things, he thought. Good friends, lovers, people in general. That seemed like a solid enough answer.

But good friends certainly couldn't make us younger bring back the dead. So that seemed a tad off. Nor were people born in an instant. And they didn't last for an eternity. And, as far as he could tell, they weren't left over from ancient Egypt either.

He focused on the end then. What was left over from ancient Egypt? Artifacts, ruins, and history were the first things that came to mind. But again, he couldn't really fit those into the other categories.

Except history, he supposed that could make someone laugh or cry. And to an extent it could bring back the dead. But something felt off with the born in an instant bit. So he decided to not give that as an answer, although it was his best option so far.

He thought about it for a few more moments. Like the first challenge he faced, he felt like he knew it, although he couldn't really place why. He felt like something from his life should give the answer. The Sphinx seemed to be growing impatient.

"Do you have an answer yet?" she asked. Lifting up one of her paws.

"Not a correct one," Harry responded. "Am I under a time limit?"

"No, but it was my understanding that you were in a race," she commented.

"I am. And I think debating a riddle is probably a better idea than fighting a beautiful sphinx," he teased. The sphinx smiled at him.

"Wise move, young champion," she said. "Would you like me to repeat the riddle?"

"If you like," Harry responded. And she did.

He simply kept thinking. He knew he had the answer somewhere. Somewhere in his past maybe? He thought back over his life, starting with living in the cupboard at the Dursley's. That was sad,

he didn't want to think about that. So he shifted to thinking about realizing he was a wizard. That was better.

His thoughts shifted to his first year. Becoming friends with Ron, saving Hermione from the troll, receiving the invisibility cloak. Those thoughts all made him happy. He couldn't think of the cloak without thinking of his first adventures sneaking around the castle. That of course led to the mirror. And seeing his parents for the first time that he could remember. Harry's breath caught in his throat. He swallowed hard.

"Memories," he said softly.

"Good job," The sphinx said. "I was hoping I wouldn't have to eat you." She shifted away from the passage.

"Me too," Harry responded. He noticed the sphinx gave him a quick smile as he walked past.

"I hope you win," she said as he stepped into the passage behind her.

As soon as he entered, the door behind him closed. After a moment he felt himself being lifted up the dark tunnel. When it stopped he knew he was in the maze. And, while it had been translucent from the outside, inside the walls were dark.

He took a minute to orient himself, remembering which way the cup was from where he began. He picked the nearest path and walked down it. There didn't seem to be anything unusual. The maze was also either soundproof, or there wasn't any commentary for the final task, as he heard nothing. He took a moment cast a spell to indicate which way was north. That information helped him choose which path to start on.

He came to his first fork. Neither of the paths were quite the direction he wanted to go, so he picked the left one and kept walking. He continued through the maze. Heading in what he could only assume was the right direction. At the very least he kept trying to head toward the center of the maze.

He didn't know how long he'd been in the maze for. It certainly felt like a rather long time. He couldn't gauge whether or not the sun had

finally set, as the maze completely boxed them in. He assumed it had though, as it was setting when he entered the pyramid. Still, he was concerned that hadn't encountered anything yet.

Of course, he spoke too soon. He turned the corner to find another split in the path. Unfortunately one of Hagrid's Skrewts was fast asleep directly in the middle of his path. Harry couldn't help but be amazed at how large the things had grown to be. He was rather thankful that he was being exceptionally careful. It was facing away from the path he wanted to take so he figured he better just sneak past it, rather than trying to backtrack.

He carefully stepped around the creepy animal. Of course, he no longer wondered what Hagrid saw in the things, obviously they were simply bred for the tournament. He let out a deep breath as he inched around the animal. But a strange clattering noise behind him indicated that he wasn't quiet enough. He turned to see smoke arising out of the blast end of the creature.

He paused for a moment before turning back and running quickly down the hall. He ducked around the corner just ahead of the blast end, which exploded against the maze wall, knocking him back. He kept hold of his wand, though, and quickly pulled himself back onto his feet. He waited for a moment, but there wasn't any noise. Either the creature killed itself when it fired off it's back end, or it decided to go back to sleep. Harry didn't figure it was worth investigating, so he continued toward the center of the maze.

After only a few feet he heard what sounded like an injured yell from a bit in front of him. He sprinted toward it, cutting around the nearest corner. After another turn he heard another voice.

"What the hell, Krum!" Cedric shouted. "What are you doing?" Harry turned the final corner to see Cedric and Krum locked into a duel. He didn't have time to react. Krum caught Cedric in the leg with a cutting curse. That knocked the other Hogwarts champion off balance and Krum quickly finished him off with a stunner to the chest.

"What the hell, Viktor?" Harry yelled, miming Cedric's words. He leveled his wand on the Durmstrang champion as he spoke. Krum slowly turned to see him, raising his own wand toward Harry. The

Bulgarian's eyes were glazed over, his movements seemed to lag, and his expression was blank.

"Reducto!" Krum said, shooting the curse at Harry. But he fired wide and Harry dodged it easy.

"Stupefy!" Harry yelled. The red light shot straight at Krum, who didn't even bother to move. Harry approached slowly and looked at both Krum and Cedric. Krum looked normal now that he was stunned, but something was wrong before that. He just couldn't see Viktor willingly attacking another champion. Maybe he was wrong, as he knew Viktor always played to win, but he doubted it. He would have revived the other Hogwarts champion, but the leg wound looked far past his capability to fix, so he simply turned and headed down the path that pointed the closest to the center of the maze. He could only assume the spectators saw the confrontation, and a judge would come up to remove the stunned bodies.

He kept walking then. Again, he didn't really encounter anything. It felt strange. Like there should be more to the task. Not that he was complaining. Of course, after what he just witnessed from Krum he couldn't help but be worried for Fleur. He got a terrible mental image of her body laying in some corner of the maze, left unattended for whatever horrors were around. He wished he knew if she was okay.

But he couldn't dwell on that. He simply had to keep going. So that's what he did. He simply soldiered on. Knowing that the task would end if Fleur got to the cup. And knowing that if he got their first, he could end it and find out if she was okay.

He figured another ten minutes passed. He felt like he was walking in circles, but he didn't think he'd hit the center of the maze yet. At least to his best judgment. He paused and used his wand to determine which way was north. He oriented himself and kept moving on. Then, after a few more turns he saw it. The Triwizard Cup glittered in front of it. He almost couldn't believe it. He was a few hundred feet away from winning the Triwizard Tournament.

Harry broke into a sprint straight toward the cup. But when he hit the halfway point he heard a loud, terrible shriek from his right. He skidded to a stop and turned to his side. Fleur came bolting around the corner. She looked completely exhausted. He could tell she was struggling to stay moving. There were also fresh bruises on her face,

and her uniform was torn in a couple of spots. She also clutched at a cut on her side.

" Arry!" she yelled upon seeing him. "Take ze stupid cup!" he turned to move toward it but a giant, lumbering figure cut into his peripheral vision. A humanoid bull carrying a large axe ran toward Fleur. A minotaur? The organizers really had gone all out. Fleur struggled to move away from it, stumbling toward Harry. He knew he wouldn't make it to the cup before the Minotaur got to Fleur, so he did the only thing he could think of. He turned and ran right at the beast.

"Reducto, Diffindo, Stupefy, Reducto!" he yelled, shooting the spells just past Fleur and into the beast. The cutter and the second Reducto made contact. But had little effect on slowing down the creature. At the very least, it turned its attention to Harry. He paused for a moment, before running away from the Minotaur, which chased after him. He ducked around a swing of the giant axe and hit it with another Reducto at close range. That seemed to knock the beast back for a minute. But it recovered surprisingly quickly and swung the axe again. Harry ducked under the blade and scampered away.

But the minotaur moved quickly. It shifted the axe so the blade was perpendicular to the ground and swung it around once more. Harry couldn't dodge the larger area this time. He flew hard into the wall. His entire side felt crushed and he could only blearily make out the beast raising the axe above its head, ready to bring it down once more.

"Expulso!" Fleur shouted from a few feet away. The axe exploded in the minotaur's hands, sending bits of shrapnel in all directions. Harry raised his arm to cover his face and felt some of the small shards pierce into his skin.

The minotaur roared in anger and turned itself on Fleur. Harry forced himself to his feet as he watched the beast ram into Fleur, forcing her hard into the wall of the maze. It backed away and let her fall to the ground. She coughed a couple of times as she tried to regain her breath. On the final cough a bit of blood trickled out of her mouth.

"Reducto!" Harry shouted. The curse hit the minotaur square in the back, but the beast ignored it. Instead it reached out and picked up Fleur, holding her against the wall with one hand as it prepared to hit her with the other. Harry needed something stronger. He needed to

stop it immediately. His thoughts filtered back to his first defense cast with Professor Moody and he knew what he had to do. It wouldn't hurt Fleur any more than it had. He wouldn't let it. He felt white-hot rage fill him. He would destroy it before he let it harm her again. He couldn't feel the pain from his side or his arm as he leveled his wand at the beast once more.

"Crucio!" he yelled. The minotaur roared again. This time in obvious pain. It dropped Fleur and turned on Harry. But he simply kept his wand focused on it, his teeth clenched his eyes not leaving the creature. It turned to run at him, but it only made it a few feet before it collapsed, twitching in obvious agony. He didn't remove his wand through. He could feel the anger, the power, the magic, all flowing through him, focusing into his wand and then onto the creature. He didn't know how long he kept the beast under the spell, but eventually Fleur made it to his side, and lowered his arm.

"It's done, 'Arry," she said. Harry felt drained the second she spoke. He was far more tired than after the quidditch match. He could feel the sharp pain in his arm from the exploding axe, and his side ached from the other blow.

"A fucking minotaur?" he said, panting for air. Fleur leaned on him. At first he thought she was going to support him, but he quickly realized they were both struggling to stand under their own power.

"Strange, zat was not far off my first thought," she said, raising her hand to suppress a cough. Harry noticed blood in her hand when she lowered it.

"Are you going to be okay?" he asked.

"I will be fine after you take the cup," she said. They made it to the pedestal with the trophy on it. Fleur leaned against it and cast a quick healing spell on herself, and then on Harry. It didn't have much of an effect, but it made him feel better. He hoped it focused on her internal bleeding.

"I don't know if I should take it," Harry admitted. "You saved my life from that beast. And I wouldn't have made it this far without your help with the books."

"Don't be a fool, 'Arry. I would not be here without your help either. And you finished off the minotaur before it could kill both of us. Just take ze stupid cup and end ze tournament."

"It doesn't feel right. We both owe it to each other," he said.

"Stop being noble," she ordered.

"How about we take it together?" he asked. That seemed like a good enough compromise. She looked at him for a moment. He thought she was going to argue, but when she spoke she did not.

"Fine. On three," she said, holding one of her hands close to the cup. Harry raised one of his own hands near the cup as well. "One. Two. Three." Harry grabbed hold of the cup then. Fleur didn't move her hand. He glared at her, but immediately knew something was wrong. The maze wasn't melting away safely, instead it started to collapse around them. And he could feel a pull at his waist.

"Fleur!" he shouted, reaching with his other hand and grabbing her just before they were both pulled away.

They landed with a thunk and a loud crack. Fleur screamed immediately. Harry noticed her leg bent awkwardly beneath them. He dropped the cup and looked around.

"Are you okay?" he asked immediately, kneeling next to her.

"Yes. But I zink ze leg is broken," she said.

"Sorry," he said. "It didn't want to leave you there. It looked wrong," he said. She nodded a little bit as if she understood.

"Zank you. But zis does not look like a victory ceremony," she said as he helped her to her feet. Letting her lean on him for support.

"No. It doesn't," Harry said, looking around. "It looks like a graveyard." They started to walk around, very slowly with their collective injuries.

"You are right," Fleur said, wincing with nearly every move. "Something is wrong."

"We should go back," Harry said. Fleur seemed to agree as she started to force them backwards.

"No. You should stay a while," a cold voice said from in front of him. A worse pain than he had ever felt shot through Harry's scar. He nearly collapsed with Fleur. It couldn't be. Not right now. But after just a moment of silence the cold voice spoke again.

"Wormtail, kill the spare," it said. Nearly as soon as it finished, a jet of green light raced straight toward the champions.

Author's note: Erm. Yea. I'm going to go hide in the corner for a while. On the positive side, the next segment is pretty much done, more or less. Onichun summed up the chapter with a, "you, good sir, are a downright bastard." and I imagine that'll be the general sentiment from most readers.

On a more technical note this quickly became my favorite chapter to write. Up until now that distinction belonged to either the first task, or the first quidditch match. But about three fourths of the way through this one I that changed. It's the first chapter I was literally giddy to send off to the betas. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

I'm not sure I even have to say what's up next, but up next is the culmination of the tale. I plan on finishing it within the week.

On a slightly related note the author rdg2000 wrote an Omake to chapter 12 of Letters with the idea of 'Top Broom' it was something he suggested I should attempt to implement, but my plans fell through. A while back he asked if he could write one and publish it under his own name. I agreed, and think it's turned out delightfully well and would encourage everyone to give it a look. It may help to view an episode or two of the BBC show Top Gear first, but there are plenty of youtube clips available. I'd suggest any of the races they do through various locations. My personal favorite being the race through London on a bike, car, boat, and public transit. Also, most seasons are available on Netflix, although I'm probably violating one of the ToS's by mentioning that. Either way, if you're not a petrol-head, the show can still be amusing just by the chemistry between the trio of presenters.

Anyway, thanks for your continual support and reviews. I appreciate every last one. Hope you enjoy the chapter!

Chapter 19

The Graveyard

Harry saw the green light flying directly at them. His world slowed to a complete halt as it approached. His entire body hurt. His entire left arm burned from the dirty wound. He could feel the bits of shrapnel inside of it, and he could feel the blood slowly seeping from the many tiny wounds.

His side ached too. He knew something had to be crushed in there. Thankfully, he wasn't the one coughing up blood. Although he wasn't sure he should be thankful for that. Still, the axe-wielding minotaur packed a larger punch than Krum on a broom. At the very least, he didn't want to look into a mirror for the next few days. Of course, he probably shouldn't be thinking about what he looked like at the moment.

His legs also ached. Harry was amazed they were still supporting him and most of Fleur. He still wasn't sure what time it was, but the fatigue from the quidditch match, coupled with little rest and then the actual third task had really taken its toll on his body. Of course, it really didn't help that he'd fought a minotaur worked in there as well.

His uninjured arm was wrapped around Fleur's back. It held her against him, all of her weight was shifted off of her broken leg.

Harry's eyes focused on the green jet of light. It was his fault that Fleur was here. She hadn't taken the trophy. He'd grabbed her before the Portkey had activated because he thought the maze was collapsing. She didn't deserve this fate, and it was his fault she was here with him.

It took him less than a moment to decide what to do. All those thoughts filled through his mind in less time than it took the killing curse to reach the champions. Harry knew exactly what he was going to do, and he reacted almost purely on instinct. He let his right arm slide off of Fleur's body and leaned hard against her, intentionally knocking her off balance. Fleur stepped gingerly onto her leg, but maintained her balance.

Of course that was only in time to see the curse hit Harry square in the chest. She would have sworn he gasped as the light hit him. But,

in the end, his expression simply went blank, and he collapsed onto the ground in a heap.

Harry stretched carefully. He opened his eyes carefully and saw three large hoops rising above him. He didn't remember when, or where, he'd lost his clothing. And it was a little disturbing to be laying naked on the quidditch pitch. At least there didn't seem to be anyone in the stands watching him. That would have been difficult to explain. Then again, he couldn't explain it to himself, which was a little problematic.

Annoyingly, he noticed that his glasses were gone. But as he stared up at the hoops he didn't think his vision was overly affected by the loss, so he shifted his thoughts to something else.

Wasn't he supposed to be in pain, too? He vaguely remembered something about pain. His arm, his chest, and his legs. They'd all hurt. He remembered that. He looked at his arms first. Something had been dreadfully wrong with them. No. They were fine. Covered in goose bumps, but otherwise normal. He lifted his head up and looked down over his chest. Nothing looked out of the ordinary there, either. But was he usually that pale? He didn't think so, but he could be wrong. He moved his legs a little bit then. They seemed to be in perfect working order as well. Strange. He remembered being hurt, but he couldn't think of how. Still, he felt otherwise fine. Albeit a little cold.

Harry pushed that thought to the back of his mind before he sat up and looked around. Nothing seemed too out of the ordinary, excluding the fact that there wasn't a single living person around. He stood and started to walk from the hoops toward the center of the pitch. He looked around and noticed there didn't seem to be anything other than the quidditch pitch. There was no castle, although the pitch looked identical to the Hogwarts one, no lake, no ship, carriage, no hut for Hagrid and no forest. That was odd.

Harry saw something at the center of the pitch. It appeared to be little more than a small, quivering, huddled mass. But, given that it was the only other object in the general vicinity. He figured it had to be worth investigating.

The creature seemed to writhe more when he approached it. Harry glanced down at it, but he couldn't really think of how to describe it.

It looked sort of like a baby, but not one that was fully developed, and sort of like it had been vomited up by some sort of animal. Part of him wanted to help him. Part of him thought it would probably be better off if he simply put it out of its misery.

Of course he didn't have his wand. And there weren't many places he could stash it at the moment. He walked back to where he'd woken up, but there was no sign of his wand. He spent a few moments looking around the surrounding area, but there still wasn't any sign of the magical tool. He gave up then, with a shrug to no one in particular.

Harry couldn't think of anything else to do other than walk back toward the weird creature in the center of the pitch. He noticed a spare robe next to it, and figured he should throw it on, at least it should be warmer. The robe was a tad big for him, but he wasn't really in a position where he could complain about it.

He spared the strange creature one last quick glance before looking toward the opposite hoops on the stadium. That was the only area he'd yet to explore, so he figured he should. Almost as soon as he crossed over the line that connoted the offensive zone, two figures walked between the hoops and started to approach him. He couldn't make out who they were, but something seemed vaguely familiar.

After a few more steps he knew why. He broke into a run immediately. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. Deep down, he knew what it meant, but it wasn't something he wanted to focus on. So instead he just ran toward them. He slowed as he approached, out of fear that he may knock his target over.

Still, after just a few more steps, he gave his mother the first hug he could remember. He held very tightly onto her, as if she may vanish at any given moment.

"Harry," she laughed. "Not so tight! It's okay. I'm not going anywhere." She hugged him back. They were silent for a moment. Together as a family for the first time since that fateful night. After a moment he backed away from his mother and gave his father a hug as well, before he finally spoke.

"I'm dead, aren't I?" he asked. "I got hit by the Killing Curse in the graveyard." The memories came rushing back as he admitted it.

"That explains why all the wounds are gone, and why I feel pretty much normal."

"You did," James agreed. "But we'll get to that in a moment. But first. You're one hell of a flyer."

"Oh James! Quidditch? Why is it always quidditch. The first time you've been able to speak to your son where he can actually respond and you bring up quidditch?" Lily reprimanded her husband.

"What!" James replied indignantly. "I'm so proud of him and I've wanted to tell him that for years. I can only imagine how good you'd be if we'd been flying since you were five."

"I'd have beaten Krum," Harry said rather matter-of-factly.

"You'll do that anyway the next time you play," His father responded. "That feint you got him with was brilliant."

"Thanks." Harry couldn't help but smile at that. "You were watching?"

"Of course," his mother said. "We watch over everything you do. We are very proud of you. And for far more than just being a good quidditch player. I was particularly impressed when you fought the basilisk. Although, I will admit, I thought for sure you were going to join us that night."

"Me too," Harry admitted.

"When it poisoned you I was a complete wreck. But then Fawkes showed up. And suddenly you had a sword. And then James turned to me and said," she paused, looking over at her husband.

"Slytherin's pet be damned. Our boy is going to kill that thing," James added without missing a beat.

"And you did!" His mother exclaimed. "And then the next year you really started to blossom!"

"We were even more proud when you started to work with Remus. Although Lily started balling when you admitted what you heard when the Dementors came," James said.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, turning to his mother. She frowned.

"It was nothing you could control. But to have such trauma last so long. You do know how much we wish we could have truly watched you grow." Her voice was soft. Harry could only nod his understanding.

"And we were so happy when you were going to exonerate Sirius. Had he not rushed off to chase down Wormtail," James paused. "Well, one day he'll get a piece of my mind. Hopefully that day is far in the future.

"Let's hope," Harry agreed. "I may have to give him a piece of my own mind about that. It certainly would have been better than the Dursleys." His mother flinched at his words.

"We cannot express how sorry we are about that," she said. "They were literally our last choice. Thrown on at the end because the Goblins wanted another option, and we knew Moony wanted no part of raising a kid. I convinced James. We had no idea just how horrible it would be. Certainly, we would have never treated Dudley that way. I-" Harry sensed this rant could go on for a while so he stopped his mother.

"It's okay. It's over. And it isn't like we can go back and change it," Harry said. James and Lily exchanged a very quick glance.

"It is not okay. But we don't need to discuss it if you don't want to," Lily said carefully.

"I don't," Harry responded quickly. "There's very few things I'd like to discuss less to be honest."

"We can understand that. You probably have quite a few questions," his father stated.

"Yes. I do. But I don't even know where to start," Harry admitted. "Are we ghosts?"

"No," James said.

"We're not really anything," Lily said. "It's very hard to explain. We're a representation of what we were. But we only exist here."

"And where exactly is here?" Harry asked.

"We don't know. You'd have to tell us that," His father said, gazing around. Yet Harry could tell as James looked around that he wasn't really seeing anything. At least anything past Harry.

"It looks like the quidditch pitch at Hogwarts. Yet there's no sign of the castle or anything." Harry turned and walked around the pitch a little. His parents followed him. "So I'm not really sure exactly what it is."

"The quidditch pitch at Hogwarts sounds fine," Lily said.

"You have spent quite a bit of time on that pitch in the last year." James said. "Which really has been a treat to watch. You should go professional. I could tell you were thinking about it at the World Cup. You're good enough. It's always nice to go after your dreams,"

"I'm not sure I really have a choice in that matter right now," Harry said, turning toward the center of the pitch. He didn't notice James's smirk as he spoke. "What is this thing?" he asked when he was standing above it.

"That's also hard to explain," James said. "But Lily will do a better job than I could."

"It's a taint. A blight on the soul. An unfinished shard of someone else that infested you. A bit of dark magic that's better off destroyed," his mother explained.

"So we can't do anything for it?" Harry said.

"Nice of you," James responded dryly.

"No. There isn't," Lily said. "And you do not want to. When Voldemort attempted to kill you, he accidentally placed a bit of his soul in you."

"Part of Voldemort is in me?" Harry asked. That though made him want to throw up. Had anyone actually known that? There had to be something that could have been done.

"Was," James said. "As you can see, it's writhing in pain on the ground at the moment."

"James," his mother scolded.

"Did anyone know?" Harry asked.

"Dumbledore assumed. He never explained what happened when we died. You see, Voldemort hadn't intended to kill me. I'm not sure what his plan for me was, but he only wanted you dead. When I died for you it invoked an old form of sacrificial magic. Because of it, Voldemort couldn't touch you. It's what killed professor Quirrell in your first year."

"Yes, Dumbledore told me that it was magic from your love," Harry said. Lily nodded.

"He did. It was the last blessing I could give. Even if I wasn't quite sure I was giving it."

"Well I'm sorry I squandered it," Harry said.

"You really think that?" James asked with a slight laugh. "How many lives do you think you saved by preventing Voldemort from getting the stone? From killing the basilisk? You've delayed Voldemort's return. And you think you've squandered it?"

"Well, maybe. But I'm dead," Harry said dumbly.

"Death does not necessarily equate to a squandered life, Harry," Lily said as if she wanted to impart some great lesson. Harry paused for a moment and simply thought. That made sense. It wasn't the duration of the life that was important, but rather how it was lived.

"I guess I was only supposed to get one year, but instead I got fourteen," he said. "And I think I did some good during those years."

"Quite a lot of good," his mother said.

"There's only one problem," James added.

"What?"

"You have a lot more time than fourteen years," James said.

"But I died," Harry said. "I got hit by the Killing Curse. No one survives that. But, well. Me." His voice trailed off as he thought about that. Was he really special enough to survive twice?

"Two for two, well done!" James exclaimed. Lily glared at him again.

"Yes. You're not dead, Harry. I couldn't bear it if you were," his mother said. "But it is purely luck that you are not."

"But how?" Harry asked.

"That," James said, gesturing to the creature.

"When the second curse hit you, it destroyed that rather than you," his mom explained, although Harry had already assumed that from his father's comments.

"So I can go back?" Harry asked, his chest swelling with hope. Even though he now knew Wormtail and Voldemort were back there. He'd at least get one final shot.

"Yes, you can," James said. "You can go back and end it, my son. You can finish what you started, by chance, all those years ago. You can be hailed a hero for your own accomplishments. Harry Potter, Triwizard Champion and the one who finally defeated Lord Voldemort. You have to admit, it sounds excellent." Harry agreed. It did sound good.

"You think I can do it?" Harry asked his parents. "I'm pretty beat up back there."

"You are, but you are also one of the most resilient people I have ever seen, my son. The chances are very good for you if you return. At least if Fleur hasn't handled it already. But she's in worse shape than you," Lily responded.

"Speaking of her," James said quickly. "While I do have to say good job on gaining the affections of a girl nearly as beautiful as my own wife, but did she have to be French?"

"James!" Lily scolded again.

"What! I'm just saying. You know how the French are," James argued.

"And you know perfectly well that she's a charming girl," Lily countered.

"But she's French," James stated as if that completely settled the matter. His mother rolled her eyes and chose instead to ignore her husband.

"She's wonderful, Harry," she assured him. "And we're both happy for you. Although she may be a tad old for you."

"I don't think so," Harry countered.

"You wouldn't. But you should get back to her. She may be in danger," his mother answered.

"I," Harry paused. "I don't know if I want to leave you two." He looked at his mother as he spoke, but his gaze shifted to James after just a few moments.

"Oh Harry," Lily said. "You must. We're in your head. Just know that we are with you, always. Live a long, happy life and come tell us about it years and years from now."

"I will," Harry said. He turned to leave then, knowing that if he spent much more time with his parents he truly wouldn't want to ever leave. But he'd only taken a few steps before James called out.

"Harry, wait!" his father yelled. He turned and looked back at the old man.

"Yea, dad?" he said weakly, his voice catching in his throat.

"Just one more thing. You used an unforgivable in the maze. Promise me you won't ever do that again. Those spells have

consequences you do not yet realize. There's a reason they're illegal. They can transform your soul into, well, that." He gave a quick nod to the nearly still creature on the ground. Harry wanted to argue. He wanted to say it was only to save Fleur's life. And that he didn't know another spell that could have worked. But his father's face was set, and he could do no more than agree.

"I promise," he responded weakly.

"Good. Now give them hell," James ordered. Harry nodded and gave his parents one last, full smile before turning and walking away from the pitch.

Back on the cold earth in the middle of the graveyard where a wizard, a snake, and a deformed creature tried to finish off a weakened witch the momentarily forgotten corpse twitched. The best laid plans always did seem to go awry. None of the combatants noticed the slight movement. And none of them noticed as Harry Potter opened his eyes.

Fleur watched him fall. She'd been able to do nothing more than reach out and try to grab at him. But it hadn't been enough. The green light vanished into his body and he fell forward to the ground. Fleur moved quickly over to him, but she could tell there was nothing left there.

She looked up quickly. A robust man fell backward, almost in sync with Harry. He appeared to drop something as he fell. It looked a bit like a small child wrapped in a blanket.

"Wormtail!" it shouted, sounding frightened and concerned.. But the other man just twitched a little bit and started to struggled back to his feet. The discarded creature quickly appraised the situation before yelling. "Nagini come to me!" Fleur saw a gigantic snake slither around one of the grave stones and circle around the creature.

She could think of nothing better to do than draw her wand and kneel near Harry's body. She looked over her shoulder and saw the Triwizard cup laying behind them, well out of her reach. Maybe, she thought, just maybe, she could get both of them back to it before the assailants noticed.

"Wormtail, get up!" the cold voice of the creature ordered. The other man, Wormtail, slowly struggled to his feet. He was winded and looked dazed, but he was back up.

"Yes master," he responded blearily. He'd found his wand as well, but it looked like he was struggling to stay on his feet.

"Wormtail, subdue the girl! We can probably still use the boy's blood if you hurry!" the creature yelled. Fleur really didn't like the sound of that. But she could barely move. Her injured leg quivered underneath her. As Wormtail leveled his wand on her, she could do nothing more than hope it was over quickly.

"Stupefy," he said. The jet of red light seemed to be coming right at her, but it missed. She wasn't sure how, but it shot wide. Wormtail tried to conjure ropes around her, but they wouldn't approach her either.

"You fool!" the creature shouted. "Get her already. It's just a defenseless girl." But no matter what the robust man tried, he failed. Fleur watched in awe as the spell flew past her. She couldn't explain it, but knew she needed to capitalize on it immediately. She raised her wand and took very careful aim at the one called Wormtail. He seemed to be the largest threat. She'd worry about the child and the snake later.

"Avada Kadavra!" Wormtail shouted as he saw Fleur raise her wand. The green light zoomed past her shoulder and destroyed one of the grave markers. By now, Fleur didn't even flinch away from the curse. She took her time aiming. She knew she didn't have much energy left and she would have to make all of her spells count.

"Stupefy!" she said, merely because she figured the sunning spell was her best bet at incapacitating a target at that point. The red light looked so feeble as it left her wand that Fleur couldn't help but think there wasn't any chance it would actually stun someone. But Wormtail was so shocked, or perhaps frustrated that all of his efforts has resulted in nothing, that he didn't even make an attempt to dodge. When the spell hit him, he collapsed to the side, eliciting a loud scream from the child.

"Stupid girl!" it shouted. "You have no idea what you are interfering with. I would have let you go, but now it is too late for that." It hissed

then. The snake that had circled protectively around it perked up and hissed back. The child-creature nodded and the snake moved away from its master and slithered slowly toward her.

"Stupefy!" she said again. The red light looked even weaker than it had before. The snake easily avoided it. Fleur tried again, and again, but the snake dodged it every time. It was only a few feet away from her when she attempted one final stunning spell. It was so weak she could barely see the color in spell as it impacted uselessly into the ground behind the creature.

She dropped her wand onto the ground in front of her and stared at the creature. It lifted up, clearly savoring every moment before finishing her off. Its jaws opened very wide as it prepared for the strike that Fleur knew would end her life.

"Reducto!" she heard from behind her. She felt the magic shoot past her head and she watched as the curse impacted into the snake's open jaws. One moment, the creature had a distinct head and face, the next it was simply a mess of destroyed flesh. She just stared at the headless beast as the child-like creature let out another shriek. Fleur turned back and saw what she knew was impossible.

"Arry?" She gasped. "You are alive. That is not possible." She just stared at him. He stood behind her, his left arm crossed over his body, the hand resting on his injured side. He had his wand leveled on the child-like creature wrapped in the blanket.

"Good," the creature said. "Harry Potter is not dead. My plan can still be completed. I will just have to do it myself." It reached into its robes, presumably to reach for its wand.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry said. The creature's wand flew up into the distance. Harry pointed his wand at it. "Accio." He winced as he moved his left arm to catch the wand.

"You petulant child!" the creature shouted. Fleur sensed it wanted to say more, but Harry interrupted.

"Shut up," he said sternly. "You killed my parents. You've tried to kill me, and then you expect me to listen to you? My parents bested you three times before that coward betrayed them. I've bested you three times. And still you tried again." Fleur knew who he had to be talking

about. But she struggled to believe it. Lord Voldemort? He was supposed to be dead!

"Luck from your mother hardly counts as besting me twice, boy," the Voldemort creature said.

"I beat you as a baby, I beat you as you infested Quirrell, I destroyed your diary, and now I have you unarmed in your own damn trap," Harry said. "So I suppose four times is more fitting."

"You destroyed my diary?" Voldemort asked, his tone a mix of surprise and fury.

"I did, with a fang from your ancestor's pet," Harry taunted.

"Impossible, boy. I would have known if that happened! And I'm certain you didn't fight Slytherin's basilisk," Voldemort responded. Harry just shrugged.

"I don't find a need to prove it to you. It doesn't matter anyway. It all ends tonight," Harry said, leveling his wand on Voldemort. The Dark Lord tried to escape as Harry took aim. But Fleur noticed movement out of the corner of her eye.

"Ze other man!" she yelled, hoping Harry would understand. He quickly turned and cast the spell.

"Stupefy!" he yelled. The red flash of energy was brilliant. Fleur had no idea how he had so much energy left. The spell hit Wormtail, who collapsed back against the ground. Harry moved over quickly and cast a full body bind on the other man. When Harry was sure that Wormtail was completely immobile he turned back to Voldemort.

"So you're going to try to kill me then, boy?" The Dark Lord taunted. "Get on with it then."

"I'm not going to kill you," Harry said. "I'm going to take you back to Hogwarts. Put you in front of the ministry, and put you away forever." Voldemort simply laughed.

"You think that will work? I still have followers everywhere. I'll be back out and at full strength in a week."

"Really?" Harry tried to sound naive. But then it was simply his turn to laugh. He'd spent enough time around sponsors and reporters to know exactly what he was going to do. "More supporters than Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, the Hogwarts quidditch prodigy, and the Triwizard Champion, and the boy who captured the Dark Lord? Lucius Malfoy isn't dumb enough to try to bail you out. I'll have all of Europe behind me." Fleur couldn't be sure, as she could barely make out the cloaked child, but she thought it looked afraid, for the first time since they'd arrived at the graveyard.

"That won't work," Voldemort said a little too quickly.

"If you insist," Harry said. "I have to disagree with you, though. I think it'll be quite effective. But I'm very sick of talking to you. You're a piece of shit. You've destroyed far too many lives for nothing. I truly hope this spell kills you. But I doubt I'll be that lucky. Stupefy!" another jet of red light shot from his wand and hit Voldemort. The Dark Lord fell still. Harry walked over and cast a body-bind on Voldemort, before he lifted up the small body. He walked back toward Wormtail then, and cast a sticking charm on the man's chest. He attached Voldemort to him, before levitating the two and moving back toward Fleur. He kneeled in front of her.

"Are you okay?" he asked. She just nodded and kissed him. Deeply. Harry lost himself for a moment, before he realized her lips tasted faintly of blood and remembered that they really were beat up, so he pulled away.

"I'm fine," said, seeming to remember that she hadn't answered his question. "But 'ow are you alive?"

"I don't really know, Fleur," he said. "I thought I was dead. I saw my parents. There was something about Voldemort's soul. That he infused part of into me when he tried to kill me. And that was destroyed, rather than mine. And that I could come back. So I came back."

"Zat is three times you saved me tonight, you know," she said.

"Well, in fairness, I directly caused two of the incidents," he responded. She just shook her head.

"We should get back to ze school," she said after a moment.

"Probably. Can you even stand?" He asked, shifting so he sat next to her.

"Maybe. I do not know," she responded, looking down at her broken leg.

"Well, how do we get back. Will the Portkey still work?" He asked, glancing over his shoulder at the cup.

"It should. Only ze timed ones usually deactivate without a disenchantment."

"And it will support the four of us?" Harry asked, gesturing to the stunned and bound Voldemort and Wormtail."

"Again, it should, but we will 'ave to be close," she responded.

"Well that's easy enough," Harry said. He carefully pulled Fleur into his lap. She giggled a little bit, before wincing as there was no place comfortable to put her leg. After he summoned Wormtail and Voldemort closer. He wrapped Wormtail's arm around his left arm. Fleur grabbed a bit of his robe, hoping that would help with the journey.

"Ready?" Harry asked after a moment.

"Yes," she responded.

"Well let's hope this works," he said, pointing his wand at the cup. "Accio," It raced toward him. He and Fleur grabbed onto it at the same time and felt the familiar pull as they returned to the castle.

They arrived to chaos. People were everywhere and seemed to be doing little more than running around frantically. It took Harry a moment to realize that, with how everything looked around him, he should have been in the lake. But instead he sat on a giant pile of rubble.

"Professor McGonagall?" he asked as the professor hurried by. She paused and turned back to look at him. After a quick double-take she finally spoke.

"Harry! Stay right there, I'll go get Albus!" she yelled before rushing off. People in the general vicinity started to look over at them, and started to congregate on the area. Harry felt painfully exposed so he simply held tightly onto Fleur and Wormtail and hoped that the headmaster arrived soon. Thankfully he did. But Harry was rather surprised by who accompanied him.

"Harry!" Sirius Black yelled. He moved quickly through the gathering crowd. Despite walking around apparently unhindered, Harry noticed several wizards followed Black closely, with their wands trained on him. He gasped when he saw the body next to Harry. "Wormtail!"

"Who?" Cornelius Fudge asked from Dumbledore's side.

"A code name for Peter Pettigrew. I told you he was not dead. And apparently he has something on his chest. Hopefully that will sway your decision to have Mr. Black kissed tonight. A fair trial is all we ever asked for," the headmaster responded. "But for the time being. I think we should ask the champions what happened."

"Yes, yes, you're right of course. Where are those sponsors, they'll want to be here. And what's that thing on his chest?" Fudge asked, before looking around for anyone to help his cause.

"Lord Voldemort," Harry said simply. Fudge jumped and nearly slipped on a stray piece of rubble.

"Don't just go saying that name!" he yelled. Harry shrugged.

"He's stunned and bound. I doubt he minds," Harry responded. Fudge and Sirius both looked stunned, but Dumbledore kept his cool.

"Perhaps this conversation will be better in private," he said. The minister agreed with a simple nod.

That's how Harry and Fleur found themselves being interrogated in a private hospital chamber off of the Hospital Wing. Pomfrey attempted to look them over, but Fudge was insistent with his questions. The nurse seemed to adopt the attitude that if the students weren't dead yet, a few more minutes probably couldn't hurt. Harry didn't particularly agree with that, but then again, he didn't really want to be answering questions.

"You really think that creature is He-who-must-not-be-named?" Fudge asked, glancing over at the bed where the still unconscious Pettigrew rested with a bound Voldemort still stuck to his chest.

"Yes," Harry responded dryly. "You could wake him up and ask if you like. I took that wand from him, too." He gestured to the table where he'd placed it, next to his wand. Fudge looked at it, but Dumbledore picked it up.

"It does greatly resemble the wand of Tom Riddle," the headmaster replied.

"You believe everything the boy says," Fudge spat. "I suppose you taught him to use Unforgivables, too?"

"No. But as I've already told you, while their use in general is frowned upon, the law only applies to humans. No doubt, too, the government should be more concerned with the Imperius curse used on Viktor Krum. I hope the poor boy doesn't lose his sponsorship because of it."

"A curse that was cast by one of your professors," Fudge retorted.

"A Death Eater disguised as one of my professors," Dumbledore amended. "Clearly that could lend some credence to Harry's story."

"Perhaps. But we won't know until we interrogate them," Fudge claimed.

"The heads of the other schools should be present as well," Sirius said from the corner.

"Minerva is gathering them as we speak," Dumbledore said.

"We're in England, I hardly think their opinion matters," Fudge countered. Harry didn't feel like listening to the political bantering so he looked over at Sirius.

"What happened here?" he asked. Sirius walked over to the bed where he was sitting next to Fleur. They were both told to not really do much, for fear of aggravating their injuries. Fleur leaned on him. Pomfrey had fixed her leg, but she still looked very weak.

"Well, they got Cedric and Viktor out of the maze almost as soon as you left. Just about everyone was focused on the fact that Krum had tried to kill Diggory. They couldn't fathom why he would do that.

"But after a while you found the cup and the images quickly turned back to the tournament ending. Dumbledore had looked over Krum by then, he told me to go and watch Moody carefully incase anything out of the ordinary happened. Then the minotaur showed up. And just wow Harry, wow. A minotaur? I can't say I approve of your method of defeating it. But that was spectacular." Sirius gushed for a moment.

"Fleur helped," Harry responded. She just shook her head. "But anyway, what happened after I took the cup?"

"The maze and the starter tasks collapsed. The outsides sort of exploded and then the internal part just collapsed toward the lake. It ended up just being one giant pile of rubble. Even as the sponsors approached it things kept blasting off. Took a good twenty minutes for it to calm down. Everyone feared you were caught in the middle," Sirius explained. "Most people started to try to dig you out, hoping you survived somehow. A few people claimed something sucked you out of the maze just before it collapsed. But no one could be sure."

"So you just shifted out and helped with that?" Harry asked.

"No. I saw Moody sneak away from the maze and move toward the castle, so I followed him. Something just seemed off. Like he was waiting for something. He kept rubbing his wrist and pacing impatiently. So I figured better safe than sorry. I shifted out and stunned him and bound him. After a few minutes he started to change. He turned into Barty Crouch and,"

"Barty Crouch?" Harry asked. "The ministry official?"

"Oh. No. His son. Convicted Death Eater. It killed his reputation. Probably cost him Fudge's job," Sirius explained.

"Oh. He was masquerading as Moody?"

"Yes. I brought him to Dumbledore. Fudge saw me. All hell broke loose. Dumbledore convinced him to withhold judgment, for now. My

capturing a known, and presumed dead, Death Eater seems to have earned me a trial, but we'll see."

"I bet it was more complicated than that," Harry said, nodding over to where Dumbledore and Fudge were still arguing.

"It was. But I don't feel the need to bore you with the argument in detail. Suffice to say, I barely escaped the Dementors again," Sirius smiled. "Is your story really true? I mean you certainly have the evidence. But it sounds..."

"Every word," It was Fleur who responded. She looked tentatively at Sirius and then offered her hand. "It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Fleur," she said, although Sirius already knew that.

"Sirius Black," he responded, shaking her hand. "Have to say. Harry sure snared himself a looker." Fleur blushed.

"Sirius," Albus said, looking away from the argument, at almost the same moment Karkaroff and Maxime both entered the room. Madame Maxime immediately moved to Fleur's side. They started talking in French. Harry caught the gist of the conversation. Madame Maxime wanted to take her back to the carriage, but she didn't want to go.

The French Headmistress could sense that she wouldn't win that argument and proceeded to argue with Dumbledore, Fudge and Karkaroff. The argument continued for some time before Pomfrey snapped.

"Enough! Argue somewhere else. None of you have even asked one of them anything for a half hour. I need to treat these two. Find somewhere else to argue!" The nurse yelled. Karkaroff turned to argue with her, but the cold stare Pomfrey gave him prevented that.

"Perhaps Poppy is right. Let us head to my office," Albus said. After a few more moments the adults left the secluded hospital chamber. They took the still immobile bodies of Wormtail and Voldemort with them.

Pomfrey transfigured another bed out of one of the pieces of furniture in the room. She gestured for Fleur to move over toward it.

The French girl did, assuming following orders right now was the safest action.

"Fleur, I'll need you to take off your uniform. Harry referenced you coughed up blood. I need to check for internal injuries. You should probably step outside, Harry, while I examine her," Pomfrey said. She obviously wanted to check Fleur because Harry appeared to be in better shape. Fleur just shrugged and pulled off her uniform top.

"It is nothing 'e 'as not seen," she said bluntly. Harry could have sworn the nurse blushed. Still, he did his best to not stare at Fleur in her undergarments. The examination took no more than twenty minutes. Pomfrey healed most of Fleur's wounds, and seemed satisfied that there was no more internal bleeding.

"You're next, Potter," she said. Harry groaned and took off his own uniform top. The nurse picked up his injured arm first.

"This all has to come out," she said. "And it's going to hurt, no matter what I do. So get ready." Harry just took a deep breath then nodded. The nurse summoned all of the shrapnel out of his arm. She was right, it hurt almost as badly as when it had gone in. It also took three tries to get it all out. When it was done she healed the small wounds and numbed his arm.

"You probably shouldn't do any heavy lifting for a day or so. Now let me see where the Minotaur got you with the axe." The nurse moved around his side and looked at him for a few more minutes. "Couple of broken ribs. You're either very lucky, or very durable, Mr. Potter," she said as she healed his ribs. "The bruise will fade in time. Not much I can do about that. Everything feels alright?"

"So far," Harry said. "I'll let you know in the morning."

"You certainly will. I'll let you two have the private ward for the night. Hopefully you don't wake up surrounded by reporters. Just don't get up to anything. You both need your rest," the nurse said before turning to leave. She magically doused the candles that lit the room as she did. Harry didn't really have the strength to do much more than lay down on the bed and stare at the ceiling. Somehow, he managed to get under the covers.

He was only alone in the darkness for a moment, though. Fleur pulled the covers of his bed back and crawled in next to him.

"You did not tell me your godfather was Sirius Black," she said.

"Would you have believed it?" he responded.

"No. Probably not. 'E is not a mass murderer zen?" she asked. Her voice was soft, and very weak. Harry could sense she was struggling to stay awake. Of course, he was too.

"No. Peter Pettigrew, Wormtail, betrayed my parents. When Sirius went to confront him about it, Pettigrew caused the explosion Sirius is blamed for. He never got a trial," Harry explained.

"Zat is awful. I hope 'e gets 'is trial. If you feel he is innocent, I will tell my father to represent 'im," Fleur yawned. "Tell me about him?" And so Harry did. He told her of his third year. About the time-turner, and thinking he would finally have a home to go to, and how that was crushed. Fleur fell asleep during his tale. He could tell she tried hard not to, but general exhaustion won. Eventually, Harry drifted off to sleep as well, his arm loosely wrapped around the French girl.

They were awoken shortly after dawn by the nurse barging into the room.

"Oh for heaven's sake!" Pomfrey yelled. "Get into your own bed!" Fleur looked up blearily but obeyed. Unfortunately, she took the blankets with her.

"Hey," Harry said weakly, with as much displeasure as he could muster. But the nurse was on him in an instant, checking over every injury from the night before. Harry just groaned and let her. He zoned out during the check, nearly falling asleep again.

"Hmm. Well, you're as good as you're going to get for now, Mr. Potter. You're free to go. The headmaster is expecting you to report to his office for breakfast," the nurse said.

"Okay," he said, before dropping back onto the bed and closing his eyes.

"No, Mr. Potter. You have a busy day today. Now go," the nurse ordered. Harry pulled himself up and slowly walked out of the hospital. He was momentarily thankful that the nurse woke him so early, as there were no other students in the hall. He made his way back to his dorm, showered quickly and changed before making his way to the headmaster's office. But he was stopped almost immediately by a smiling Slytherin.

"So stopping the Dark Lord as a baby wasn't good enough? You figured you'd just have to do it again?" Daphne asked in a playful tone. Harry couldn't help but smile. He noticed she was carrying a glass jar.

"Well, he didn't give me many options," Harry laughed. Daphne shook her head a bit.

"I bet he didn't," Daphne responded dryly. "And here I hoped my present would be the highlight of your day."

"Your present?" Harry asked. He'd completely forgotten she'd referenced one before the final task.

"My present," she affirmed, holding up the glass jar. Harry peered into it.

"You got me a beetle?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Isn't she cute?" Daphne gushed. Harry just looked at her for a moment.

"If this is some sort of magical society thing, Daphne, you do realize I was raised by Muggles. And Muggles usually squash beetles when they see them."

"You'll probably want to do that. But I think you should hold off. I mean look at her!" Daphne ordered. She held the jar up to his face. There was something vaguely familiar about the bug. It looked incredibly like...

"Oh wow. It looks almost exactly like Rita Skeeter!" he said.

"That's because it is Rita Skeeter," Daphne responded.

"You turned her into a bug? That can't be safe, Daphne," Harry didn't know whether to scold her, or to laugh at the reporters misfortune.

"She did it to herself," Daphne admitted. "She's an unregistered animagus. That's how she's been getting those scoops all year. Some students in my house were talking to her about you, and I said I could add some terrible things, but would only talk in private. An unbreakable charm later and she's not going anywhere."

"You're terrible," Harry laughed.

"I hope that's a compliment."

"Oh it is. What am I supposed to do with her?" He took the jar from her and stared in at the beetle.

"That's up to you. It's why she's a gift. I imagine just having her miss out on the greatest news story of our time will be punishment enough, though," Daphne smirked.

"You're probably right. Thanks Daphne. I think I'll let her go before the term ends. But it should be enough damage to her to not be able to write a story in the next few days."

"Oh yes," Daphne said. "That's probably a good idea. Although I wouldn't hold it against you if you accidentally stepped on her."

"I'll save that for a last resort. I must be going, though. I'm supposed to meet with Dumbledore, and now I have to go stash Rita somewhere."

"I can take care of that," Daphne said, taking the jar back from him. "Gives you plausible deniability. And I promise I won't squash her."

"Thanks," he said, before pausing. "Really, for everything. You've been great all year."

"I know," Daphne responded bluntly, before sighing. "It's a shame you like the French girl so much. But I won't get in the way. Well, any more than I already have. Just write me a letter or something over the summer. Maybe we can get lunch some time. Friends do

that, you know." She smiled at him. Somehow it seemed like the most innocent offer she'd made him all year.

"Alright. I will," he responded. He didn't have the heart to tell her that the chances of him meeting her for anything while at the Dursley's were slim to none.

"Good. Now go to your silly meeting. Oh, and congratulations on winning the tournament!"

"Thanks, Daphne," he said once more before walking away. He didn't make it too far down the hallway before he ran into Professor Dumbledore.

"Hello Harry," he said.

"Hi," Harry responded. "I was just heading to your office. I hope I'm not late."

"Not at all. I was just coming to prepare you," Dumbledore admitted.

"For what?"

"Today will be a very long day. There will be a ceremony tonight where you will receive your winnings, but there is little I can do to prevent the media frenzy that will occur. I am hoping that by allowing them to question you early, they will focus on other topics for the rest of the day. Unfortunately, that does mean they will likely interrogate Mr. Krum all afternoon, but he is probably accustomed to it," Dumbledore said.

"Did you figure out what happened to him?" Harry asked.

"We did. We found recent evidence of the Imperius curse on Barty Crouch's wand. We figured it was safe to assume that Krum was the target."

"Probably. But he and Cedric are okay?"

"They are," Dumbledore said. Harry couldn't help but think the professor sounded relieved.

"And you've been able to prove that they are Voldemort and Pettigrew?"

"Yes. Peter has been more than willing to talk. The other two refuse to say anything. But Fudge has granted the order to use truth serum on them. And they will be questioned in front of a ministry tribunal. Peter's version of the events matches the version you gave last night. Were you really hit by another killing curse?"

"Yes. I saw my parents. They told me I could go back. So I did," Harry replied simply. He couldn't think of how to frame it better than that.

"Interesting. You will have to tell me about it for some time. But I would suggest not letting the reporters be privy to that bit of information," the headmaster advised.

"I'll leave that out then. What should I expect the questions to be about?" Harry asked.

"Everything. But I imagine they will center on Tom Riddle and Peter Pettigrew. They'll likely want your opinion on Sirius, and to know how you feel about winning the tournament. They'll likely ask about your spell choice in the maze as well. You've matured into quite the young interviewee, but if you need anything during the course simply let me know. As a minor you are not required to talk to them."

"I should be able to handle it," Harry said confidently. He couldn't help but laugh a little bit to himself. The thought of reporters used to be daunting. Now, it seemed fairly normal. "So Sirius is going to be free?"

"Not yet," Dumbledore said. "But Fudge has agreed to hold the trial. Peter essentially admitted to the murders, and will be forced to testify under truth serum though. So it looks very good for him."

"Why's Wormtail cooperating?" Harry asked. It seemed rather contrary to everything he knew, or at least everything he assumed, about Peter Pettigrew.

"He claims he was coerced. But I assume it is simply to receive a less harsh sentence. Crouch and Riddle will likely have their souls destroyed or execution. Peter is hoping for imprisonment." Harry

nodded. It made sense. He was biased, though, so he felt it was probably best if he didn't comment.

"Well let's get this over with," he said after a brief pause. Dumbledore just nodded and gave the gargoyle the password. Harry led the way up the stairs to give what would hopefully be the last interview of his fourth year at Hogwarts.

Epilogue

It was amazing how much things could change in a month. Hell, it hadn't even been a month. Harry had always dreaded the summer holiday, but the last few weeks had been nothing short of incredible.

He stretched in his brand new, incredibly comfortable, bed, making sure to not quite disturb the French girl that lay incredibly close to him. Grimmauld Place was a tad creepy, and needed quite a bit of fixer work, but Sirius was working on that at his own place. Harry had simply picked a room, and bought a few possessions, some magical, and some Muggle.

Sirius's trial had lasted less than a week, and it probably hadn't needed to be that long. Peter Pettigrew and Harry both testified. Pettigrew stuck to the script, and did have his sentence reduced to life in prison when that trial eventually finished. The first thing Sirius had done after being free, was making sure his house was still standing, before having Harry move in. It was wonderful.

And it was only made more wonderful by the fact that his godfather was an incredibly lenient guardian. The older man didn't seem to mind that Fleur spent a great deal of time at Grimmauld place. Sure, they did quite a lot as a trio. In fact, just the night before they'd had dinner at some fancy new Muggle restaurant. It was their celebration of his acquittal, a few weeks late, but they'd been busy. It had been fun, too, except for the part where the waiter assumed Sirius and Fleur were the couple.

The other trials had just wrapped up, too. Crouch and Voldemort were both given maximum punishment. Harry and Sirius had watched the Dementors administer the kiss. It had been one of the most disgusting things Harry had ever witnessed. But he watched it silently, feeling no satisfaction as he did. Crouch simply became a shell, Voldemort fought as much as the deformed body would allow,

before he too could fight no more. They were both shipped off to Azkaban then, where they would remain for the rest of their days.

Harry gazed around his new room for a few moments. He knew he'd have to wake Fleur soon, or they'd be late, but he didn't feel like getting out of bed yet, so he figured he shouldn't subject Fleur to that.

The Triwizard Cup sat on one of his shelves. It had been disenchanted and was one of the few remaining tokens of the tournament in his room. The others were a tad vain. He'd had some of the articles about the defeat of Voldemort framed and resting on his dresser. He wasn't quite sure what to do with them, but both Fleur and Sirius had insisted he should keep them somewhere.

They'd all been incredibly flattering. Rita had tried, a few days after the main articles had already been published, to write a piece on how he was going to become the next Dark Lord because of his unpunished use of an Unforgivable Curse. But with the news of the trials starting, it had gone largely unnoticed. No other reporter had even bothered to ask him about it.

He'd seen Krum briefly before he'd left. He and Hermione were going to try to keep their relationship going through letters. Harry didn't think it would last, but encouraged them none the less. He'd felt bad for the constant questions that Krum had to face in the final few days of school. But it had finally ended when the Bulgarian's coach had commented to a one of the papers that he didn't care if Krum was susceptible to the Imperius curse, as it was illegal in quidditch matches anyway.

But all the legal stuff was behind them. Sure, Fleur was still looking for a job, although the amount of effort put into the search was minimal at the moment. Today was really going to be the first real free day they'd share since the end of the tournament. Even if the scheduled plans didn't particularly appeal to either of them.

"Wake up, sleepy-head," he teased. Fleur opened one eye and stared at him.

"I am awake," she said. Obviously she'd been simply laying around like he had.

"Good. We need to get up or we're going to be late," Harry yawned, but made no attempt to get up.

"I cannot believe you are making me go to zis," Fleur said.

"Hey, you said you would," Harry countered. "And the sponsor got the tickets it would be rude not to."

"Did you ask for ze tickets?"

"No. I think it came up in conversation with him once, though," Harry said, pulling Fleur close to him.

"And yet you cannot get out of it?" Fleur asked. "I bet zey would understand. Zey better be paying you a lot."

"Nothing," Harry laughed. "But they did promise to design a broom just for me if I went professional."

"Well zat may be a good compensation."

"It may. And it's a nice day out, perhaps we'll even have fun," Harry said. Fleur rolled her eyes.

"Watching Muggles go in circles? Zat will be about as fun as dealing with your godfather's elf," Fleur teased.

"You never know. There might be some Frenchman you can root for," Harry said, staring into Fleur's eyes, his arms still loosely around her.

"Well zat may make it better. We shall 'ave to see," Fleur responded, wiggling herself very close to him.

"And if you enjoy yourself I'll take you to the National Gallery tomorrow," Harry said.

"We already planned on doing zat anyway, 'Arry," she said. "You wouldn't change ze plans on me, now would you?" she shifted against him just a little bit.

"Of course not. Just making sure you remain properly motivated today," Harry responded. He leaned over and kissed her very softly.

She responded by simply deepening the kiss and rolling on top of him. Eventually, Harry rolled them over and slid off of her.

"That's not going to get you out of it, you know. It's just going to be a few hours," He said.

"It was worth a try," she teased, before sliding out of bed. "I will shower first zen," she added. Harry just nodded and watched her disappear into the bathroom. He simply lay for a few moments and reflected on how things could change so quickly. A year ago at this time he'd been wondering what to compose in his second letter to her.

But now they were far closer than writing would allow. And they'd accomplished far more. Harry truly realized, as his eyes slid over the Triwizard Cup one more time that he was finally free. He could finally live the life he was supposed to live. It was an incredible feeling.

He pulled himself out of bed and prepared to face the day, knowing that no matter what it threw at him, it wouldn't be worse than the culmination of the tournament. He hoped that wherever his parents watched from they were happy for him.

He didn't know what the future would bring. And really, he didn't care to find out. For now he was simply going to enjoy himself. Maybe there would be a day when Harry Potter was needed again. But it wasn't today. He could think of nothing better to do than join Fleur as she prepared for the day, so that's exactly what he did.

Author's note: Well it's done. I toyed with a few ideas for the chapter, but eventually went with what had originally been planned, still liking it the most of all the options. In the first draft, the story ended after the scene with Harry and Dumbledore, but the betas suggested the addition of an epilogue. Of course, I think they were looking for something more in the future than a month, but tough.

I attempted to stay close to canon as possible while attempting to implement realism into the work. I hope I succeeded. I will say I was surprised by the amount of life-debt/soul-bond/force marriage comments that came up during the story. They must be popular in the genre, but I must admit, I can't see why. My betas both commented they can be done well, but something about taking away

the free-will of one of the characters just completely irks me. Just not my cup of tea, If I'm permitted a cliché.

Up next I'm going to work on QWC. It shouldn't take too long to finish, as its only planned to be six chapters, and word count wise about one third the length of Letters. That will probably be the last fanfic I write, and almost certainly be the last one in the Harry Potter universe.

As always, the best way to contact me is through a PM on the site. Again, thank you for your continued support and reviews. I appreciate every last one of them. It has been a fun ride.